



APPLICATION FORM

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. **Deadline: June 3, 2019.** Please include this application form with electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact Gage Harter.

PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Arlington County Government

Program Title: Six-Step Public Engagement Guide for Capital Projects

Program Category: Communications

CONTACT INFORMATION

Name: Lynne Porfiri

Title: Chief of Staff

Department: County Manager's Office

Telephone: 703-228-0599 **Website:** https://www.arlingtonva.us/

Email: Lporfiri@arlingtonva.us

SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Mark J. Schwartz

Title: County Manager

Signature: *Mark J. Schwartz*



ARLINGTON
VIRGINIA

*Arlington County's
Six-Step Public Engagement Guide for
Capital Projects*

Submission for the
Virginia Association of Counties
Achievement Awards

Executive Summary

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| Project | <u>Six-Step Public Engagement Guide for Capital Projects</u> |
| Launch Date | April 2, 2018 |
| Key Question/ Problem | How can we build a public engagement process that is efficient, transparent, and that ensures the participation of and input from the most impacted stakeholders for Arlington’s capital projects? |
| Solution | <p>After two years of research, community engagement, development, and editing, Arlington County Government launched a <u>Six-Step Public Engagement Guide for Capital Projects</u>.</p> <p>The goal of the project was to develop a framework to guide Arlington County staff and community members through an effective and well-defined public engagement process for capital projects, and to memorialize that framework within the County culture.</p> |
| Results | <p>The guide has set standards for the community and staff to work through issues as they make decisions relating to community projects. Its delineated levels of engagement have become a required element of every project and must be mentioned in County Board reports.</p> <p>Additional engagement staff members have been hired to work with the community and implement the intent of the guide. Staff members from all affected County departments were trained on the specific elements and strategies of the guide, with the County Manager setting an</p> |

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| | expectation that all staff members be knowledgeable about the levels of engagement during conversations with the community, and in senior level briefings. |
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Problem and Challenge

Prior to 2016, Arlington County’s departments practiced their own methods of engaging the public around major initiatives, creating disparate and inconsistent processes across the government, and even within departments. Community members did not know what to expect in the process: How would the process work? Would they be told about the aspects of a project that impacted them most? Could they make sure their voices were being heard? Staff members similarly had these concerns and did not have a consistent way of approaching the issue.

The County had undergone multiple attempts to try to define its public engagement process. In 2012, Arlington County created the *Participation Leadership and Civic Engagement (PLACE)* initiative where hundreds of community leaders were integral in identifying steps to better train staff, improve communication, and enhance outreach. In 2015, the County built off the PLACE initiative to develop the *Community Facilities Study*—an effort to strategize around fulfilling our capital needs in the wake of a rapidly growing population. In both efforts, several key challenges were highlighted, including an inconsistent engagement process across departments, and a lack of diverse voices and perspectives.

Both initiatives led the County toward more collaborative practices, but also an understanding that every project has different needs-- requiring different resources and providing different opportunities. In the past, engagement around each project was being treated the same and there was not a framework for how to identify that different types of projects needed different levels of engagement. Projects that could have benefited from a robust level of collaboration between the County and community stakeholders sometimes fell short on engagement timelines, strategies, and communication efforts. On the other hand, the County also found itself over extending resources to engage around routine projects, such as paving or sewer line replacement, which needed to happen anyway to ensure safety.

Partnering with the Community

Community members, department directors, and planners were involved in the development of the guide, determining the appropriate indicators for each level of engagement, providing context and project examples, and identifying potential tools that would produce the feedback Arlington decision makers seek from their stakeholders.

In fall of 2016, the County launched the development of the guide by seeking community input with a leadership forum. This included gathering insight from both internal and external stakeholders with a goal of finding common areas for improved public engagement.

Civic association presidents, non-profit directors, faith-based leaders, and other

trusted community leaders helped identify Arlington’s community values and ways that engagement would be more meaningful to them and purposeful for the County.

Throughout the drafting and redrafting of different iterations of the guide, the public and internal stakeholders were continually called upon for feedback. The County conducted 1-on-1 meetings with civic association presidents and board members, sought counsel from community leaders and organizers, and analyzed hundreds of online feedback comments from the broader community before completing the project in spring of 2018.

Over the course of the year-long project, community feedback was essential to improving the document. These check-ins helped the community reflect on how capital projects impact individuals; what gaps to fill to make all community members feel comfortable, informed, and heard; and how Arlingtonians could be encouraged to trust a public engagement process. Being able to point back to a project timeline, and where, when, and how frequently engagement occurred allows community members and staff to understand why decisions are made and how the community has been involved.

Through knowledge sharing and outreach from community leaders, effective stakeholder mapping for each project, and continuous large-scale community conversations, the County has been able to involve a wide spread of Arlington’s population in this effort. Participants ranged in background, age, income level, housing type and more. Resources such as infographics and an interactive [live capital projects map](#) helped fill gaps for participants who wanted more

information. Some community members even helped by facilitating large community conversations that informed how we improve engagement as we grow. Arlington's active community has been an essential component in the development of the guide itself.

An Innovative Approach

The County needed to find a way to make public engagement meaningful. Community members have always been an integral part of Arlington County's public engagement process, historically calling it the "Arlington Way." However, it has taken years of learning, unlearning, and relearning about the community's growing population to develop and maintain a trusting environment. *The Six-Step Guide for Capital Projects* was developed to explain easily why certain engagement steps are taken, and how we can move forward on projects together rather than finding ourselves with competing agendas that were counterproductive.

The Six-Step Public Engagement Guide for Capital Projects was developed as a tool for enhancing efficiency and elevating trust between community and government. As a major component of Arlington's commitment to continuous improvement, the guide is intended to bridge gaps in the County's public engagement processes. Community members now know what to expect in engagement processes and staff members benefit from consistent guidance in how to meet those expectations. *The Six-Step Public Engagement Guide for Capital Projects* is a tool that helps external and internal stakeholders feel anchored in the engagement process for the advancement of the County.

The 15-page document starts off by setting the foundation, explaining the purpose of having a guide, how it serves as a tool for both community members and staff, and when its use is most appropriate. It also identifies seven guiding principles that reflect values that are important to Arlington's community. These are inclusion and mutual respect, early involvement and timely communication, transparency and accountability, clear and accessible communication, open two-way communication, fiscal sustainability, and continuous improvement. It was important to work with both internal and external stakeholders to identify these principles, so the content of the guide was always rooted in *why* it was being developed in the first place.

The six steps are:

1. Clearly Define the Project
2. Identify Project Stakeholders
3. Determine Level of Engagement
4. Create and Implement Engagement and Communication Strategies
5. Conduct Analysis for Decision Makers
6. Complete Project Closeout and After-Action Review,

They help manage expectations for both staff and community members, and encourage stakeholders to understand the context around the project, who it impacts, how to reach out to and learn from those who are most impacted, and how to determine appropriate levels of engagement given the context around a project. It has allowed the County to be more effective in public engagement while ensuring that the community feels well-informed about how

projects are going, what the next steps are, and how they are encouraged to help inform decision makers with their feedback.

Along with the implementation of the guide, staff members in all relevant departments were trained on how to engage with community members effectively and get a better understanding of an individual's journey throughout a project's lifecycle. They now use stakeholder mapping, which encourages them to consider which community members are most impacted by certain projects. Critically thinking:

Where do they live, work, or play?

What's the history of capital projects in their neighborhood?

How have they been engaged in the past?

Who did we miss last time?

What are some of the most effective strategies to engage them around this topic?

Staff use worksheets and templates that are directly aligned with the guide and allow them to organize their engagement process, from defining the project, to organizing key messages for target audiences, and everything in between. They've also been incorporating engagement level identification badges (Figure 1) into project timelines, promotional material, and County Board reports to help communicate where the County is in the engagement process and how community members can identify opportunities to provide feedback.

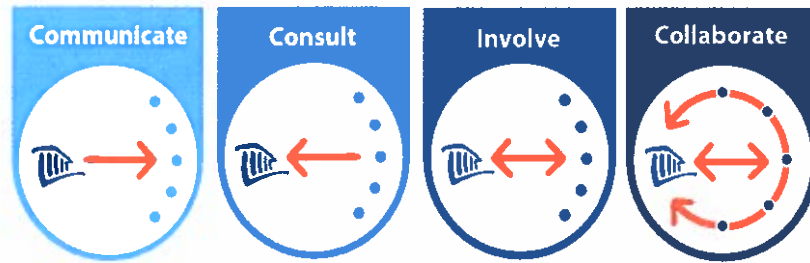


Figure 1

As a result, staff members have been able to work on closing the gap for those who might be heavily impacted and unaware. Staff members now have a better sense of community members' sentiments—making them better equipped to accurately inform Arlington County Board members in the decision-making process.

The guide also comes with a supplementary poster that clearly lays out the six steps, indicators for determining levels of engagement, and examples of projects that fall under each level. It's available to community members on the [Engage Arlington webpage](#) along with the guide in easy to read and print format.

Since the guide's creation, the County Board has heavily encouraged its use as a primary tool in navigating all engagement processes for capital projects. It has become a notable component in the County's planning processes. Community members can identify levels of engagement through badges on County Board reports and project timelines. Board reports now include details such as what level of engagement was recommended, with whom staff communicated, and what methods, strategies, and tools were used to engage stakeholders. Being able to easily

keep everyone aware of the process has allowed for an improvement in trust and participation.

The challenges that the County hopes to tackle by implementing the *Six-Step Public Engagement Guide for Capital Projects* are not unique to Arlington. The need for effective community engagement is widely recognized. The advantage of using a guide like Arlington County's is that staff can keep every individual's experience at the forefront of the engagement effort and grow trusted partnerships one community member at a time.

Brief Overview of Six-Step Public Engagement Guide for Capital Projects
(For press releases, brochures, etc.)

Arlington County's [*Six-Step Public Engagement Guide for Capital Projects*](#) is changing the way that County professionals and the community think about meaningful engagement. In fall of 2016, Arlington convened a group of community leaders from civic associations, non-profits, faith-based communities and more to learn how people who live, work, and play in the County experience engagement. That meeting was the start of a series of detailed discussions on community values and whether they were being met by Arlington's engagement practices. Recognizing the need for an agreed-upon engagement process, Arlington launched a six-step guide to help inform the planning processes that County staff regularly develop, and community members can now expect.

The guide lays out the following six steps to provide direction for meeting the engagement needs of individual projects and the people who are most impacted by them. Staff is encouraged to:

1. Clearly Define the Project
2. Identify Project Stakeholders
3. Determine Level of Engagement
4. Create and Implement Engagement and Communication Strategies
5. Conduct Analysis for Decision Makers
6. Complete Project Closeout and After-Action Review

All affected Arlington County staff members were trained on the guide and associated tools to follow the six steps effectively. Staff use stakeholder mapping to identify the effects of different projects on different groups of people and how to enhance awareness of engagement opportunities to those who are most affected. They evaluate projects before the official planning process begins to understand the history, context, and indicators that will determine the necessary levels of engagement. There are even printable versions of [the guide](#) and a [synthesized poster](#) of the key information for community members to reference on the [Engage Arlington webpage](#).

The process has been embraced by the Arlington County Manager and the Arlington County Board who routinely reference the guide before, during, and after a project planning process. The guide is part of a culture shift that encourages government and community to work in partnership and move County initiatives forward.