



ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: Friday, April 3, 2026.** Please include this submission form as the first page of your electronic entry. Contact [Gage Harter](#) with any questions.

PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Fairfax County

Program Title: Community Engagement Framework for Capital Projects

Program Category: Communications & Community Outreach

CONTACT INFORMATION

Name: Christopher Herrington

Title: Director

Department: Public Works and Environmental Services


Telephone: 571-396-1957 Website: <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/publicworks/>

Email: christopher.herrington@fairfaxcounty.gov

SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Bryan Hill

Title: County Executive

Signature: 

DocuSigned by:

Bryan Hill

5CF069274C2440E...

Fairfax County Community Engagement Framework for Capital Projects

Executive Summary

Fairfax County's Department of Public Works and Environmental Services (DPWES) annually delivers more than 50 capital projects for wastewater, stormwater, and County facility projects, valued at hundreds of millions of public dollars. These critical infrastructure projects are not only shaped by input from the community, but also directly affect the quality of life for community members before, during, and after construction.

To ensure consistency in community engagement approaches, DPWES developed and implemented a detailed community engagement framework and associated departmental policy for capital project delivery in 2025 to:

- leverage current best practices from the social sciences;
- advance social justice;
- maximize community acceptance of the County's Capital Improvement Program (CIP) projects, and
- and maintain the community's trust in the County.

The framework was developed collaboratively with other County departments, including community engagement experts in the Neighborhood and Community Services, and all capital projects managed by DPWES since August 2025 must comply with the new requirements.

As infrastructure CIP project managers are more likely to be engineers and architects and typically not social scientists or community engagement experts, the new

framework and associated tools provide specific, detailed guidance on how to design, document, and implement more effective and inclusive community engagement plans. The framework includes specific mechanisms to enable adaptive learning over time and can be replicated for any local government CIP project delivery program.

The Challenge

Fairfax County delivers a wide array of publicly funded large CIP projects annually, including police stations, fire stations, libraries, community centers, sanitary sewer infrastructure, stream restoration projects, and transportation projects. These projects require land right acquisition, design, permitting, procurement, and construction. Each phase may require unique interaction with the community, and each phase may impact the community differently.

The County has adopted a social justice policy, One Fairfax (<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/topics/one-fairfax>), and a generalized inclusive community engagement framework (<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/topics/inclusive-community-engagement>). However, DPWES capital project managers previously had no detailed guidance on how to structure community engagement plans that advance these policies.

County capital project managers with educational and professional work experience backgrounds primarily in engineering and architectural fields are also not typical experts in community engagement and often learn haphazardly through challenging direct experience when community engagement efforts are ineffective, highly contentious, or projects fail due to a lack of community acceptance. County capital project managers

are also not routinely tracking community engagement professional associations like the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) or best practices from the published social science literature. DPWES management realized that this lack of clear guidance was resulting in:

- Inconsistent levels of engagement with the community;
- Inefficient engagement increases project delivery timelines and project costs;
- Ineffective engagement is adversely impacting community acceptance of County CIP projects;
- Engagement that was not inclusive of all affected community members, inconsistent with County equity policy; and
- A loss of trust between residents and the County government.

The Solution

To address this challenge, DPWES, in consultation with community engagement experts from the County's Neighborhood and Community Services Department, worked to develop a specific guidance document for capital project managers in designing community engagement.

Underlying the framework is a new departmental policy, adopted in August 2025, that documents the purpose, scope, requirements, and procedures for community engagement plans for capital projects. The policy mandates that all DPWES-managed capital projects must comply with the framework. As stated in the policy, the purpose is to ensure all community engagement efforts are:

1. inclusive, such that all impacted parties have an equitable opportunity to participate in the engagement consistent with the County’s One Fairfax and Engage Fairfax County policies;
2. effective, such that best practices are utilized to optimize community input and the final project; and
3. consistent, such that DPWES can earn and maintain the trust of our customers, County leadership, and the Board of Supervisors to foster a sustained relationship with the community.

The framework document outlines core principles specifically for community engagement on capital projects (Table 1) with their supporting rationale, establishes a 7-step process for designing the engagement (Figure 1), aligns with the County’s categorization of engagement levels (Figure 2), contains engagement plan templates that guide project managers in developing their engagement plans (Figure 3), includes specific actions to ensure engagement is equitable and inclusive, and provides additional support resources. To ensure adaptive learning over time, the framework and policy require explicit after-action assessment from both the project manager and community perspective on the effectiveness of the engagement using specific quantifiable assessments.

Table 1. Capital Project Community Engagement Framework Core Principles

The community is our customer.
The County must sustain an ongoing relationship with our customers to be successful.
We must have unconditional positive regard for our customers.
Community engagement must be intentionally designed.
The decision authority that can be shared with our customers determines the level of engagement.
Within our constraints, we maximize the decision authority we share with our customers.

Measure success for us and our customers to inform adaptive learning over time.

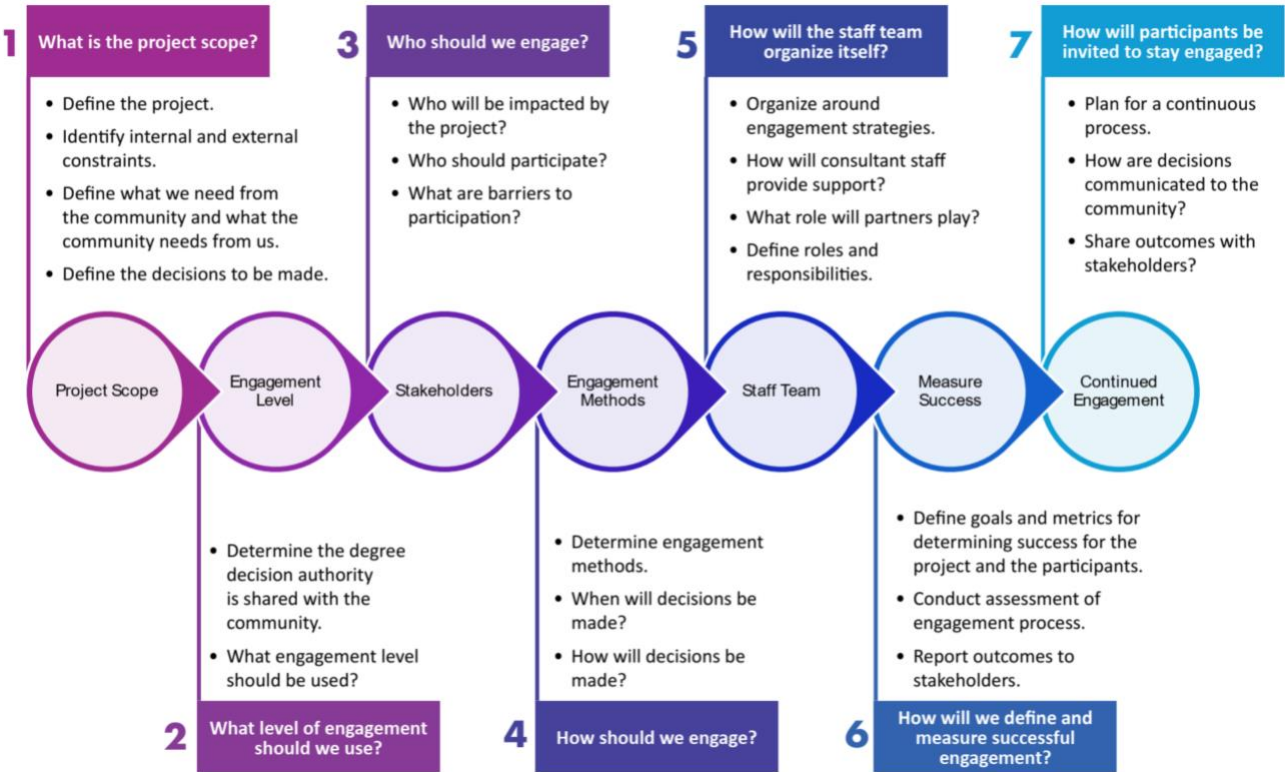


Figure 1. Seven step process for community engagement planning

Core to our framework is the understanding that the decision authority shared with the community determines the methods of community engagement, consistent with the International Association of Public Participation (IAP) Spectrum of Public Participation as adapted by the Fairfax County Inclusive Community Involvement spectrum. Engagement levels range from Understand (no shared decision authority) to Decide (decision authority shared fully with the community) (Figure 2).

Who's Making the Decision?	Factors Affecting Our Ability to Share Authority	Engagement Level (your place on the Engagement Spectrum)
Fairfax County staff and leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical safety, design or regulatory constraints limit community discretion • Project entirely within county land or easements • Very limited or no community impacts • Nothing is negotiable 	Understand
Community has input but County decides	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design flexibility limited • County has most land rights • Limited community impacts 	Contribute
Some shared decisions - Community and County work for agreement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design, safety and regulatory parameters allow flexibility • County needs land rights to implement critical parts of project • More extensive community impacts 	Collaborate
Decision authority shared fully with Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project parameters flexible and/or project undertaken specifically to address community need • County needs extensive land rights to implement • Community impacts significant 	Decide

Figure 2. Engagement levels based on shared decision authority.

All DPWES CIP project managers and their managers were required to attend an in-person training on the framework and policy in 2025. Documentation, including the policy, framework document, fillable project templates, a full recording of one of the staff training sessions, and support resource links are maintained on an internal County SharePoint site accessible to all County employees, along with training materials. Going forward, the department is developing a Community of Practice to begin in the summer of 2026 for practitioners to share lessons learned from engagement and to refine the policy as warranted.

