



FACILITATING IN-PERSON ENGAGEMENT

A guide for community planners

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[Langara](#) is also called snəwəyəł leləm, which means "house of teachings" in the language of the Musqueam people.

This PDF in it's originally published format includes alternative text, specified reading order, and other accessibility considerations.



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Introduction

Purpose

Engagement is an important part of community planning in Canada. Many planners agree that engagement is essential to the planning process, and that the way people are engaged should be chosen carefully. However, it is still treated as a check-box exercise sometimes, not being done meaningfully across jurisdictions and organizations.

Members of the public, stakeholders, and decision-makers are often engaged in person, and most of the time these activities are facilitated by someone else. Even in a digital post-pandemic age, in-person facilitation is still important. Some facilitators find that virtual engagements are more difficult, but at the same time it makes it more accessible than ever for people to provide input on community issues.

The purpose of this report is to share best practices for in-person facilitation which is conducted during community planning engagement.

Methodology

This report, which was created over a four-month period in Spring and Summer 2026, uses three research methods:

- Seven informational interviews conducted with professional Canadian planners and facilitators who work in planning
- Attending a six-hour “Fundamentals of Public Participation (P2) and Engagement” delivered by the [International Association for Public Participation \(IAP2\) Canada](#)
- Online research, mostly of Canadian sources, as well as drawing from Langara course content

What is facilitation?

Facilitating a group of people in person means being in the room to guide a process, make it easier, and help reach certain goals. In the context of community planning, facilitation is used to advance the interests of people in the room.

Facilitators are the ones who guide many types of in-person engagement, helping people provide their perspectives on an issue or topic. This can look like a structured multi-hour workshop with people who are interested in a community planning issue, or can be as simple as members of the public walking by an information board and chatting with staff.

Facilitation is a vulnerable act which requires a lot of self-knowing, energy, and reflection to be done well. It is “a dynamic and nuanced skill that requires a combination of theoretical knowledge and practical experience,” as put in Simon Fraser University's [Facilitation for Community Transformation](#) handbook.

Engagement vs. facilitation

While conducting interviews with planners for this report, an important distinction arose early on. “Engagement” and “facilitation” should not necessarily be used as synonyms in the context of community planning. Instead, you can think of engagement as the wider framework or plan for how people will be engaged. It can also be an appropriate word for individual events like an open house. Facilitation sits under the engagement umbrella; it is the “how” for engaging with people in person. It means a facilitator, whether a professional planner or not, is in the room to facilitate the engagement activities, guiding people in the room to achieve certain objectives and record the results.



What is facilitation?

The public vs. stakeholders

Another important distinction to be made is when we talk about facilitating “the public” versus “stakeholders”. For planners, it is important to be clear who you mean when you are planning and running an engagement activity.

Note: stakeholders may be referred to differently depending on the jurisdiction, organization, or other contexts. Alternate terms may include “interest holders” or “rights holders”.

The public: People who are interested in and/or affected by a topic, and are not delegates or representatives of an organization or group. The public who are engaged on an issue are often part of a community, which is a social unit that has commonalities. It is a broad concept that means different things to different people.

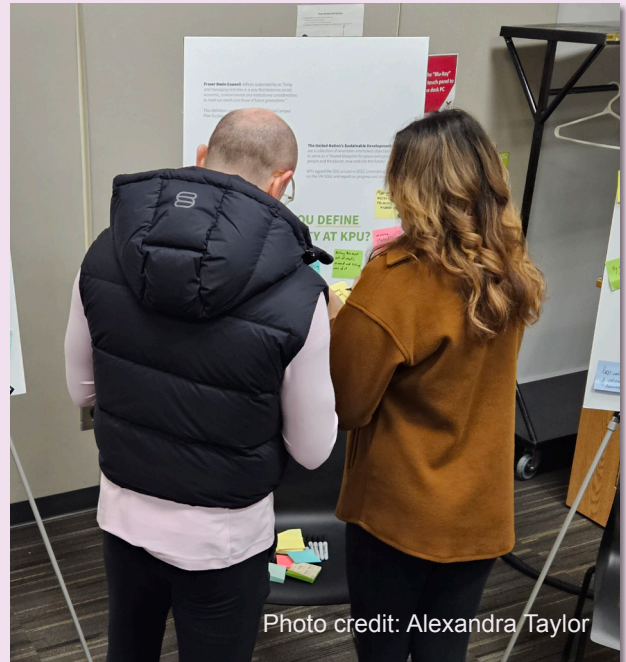


Photo credit: Alexandra Taylor

Stakeholders: People that may also be impacted by and interested in a topic, but are delegates or representatives of an organization or group. They have a “stake” in the issue, and are often most directly affected, most highly passionate, and/or hold power and influence in the matter.

IAP2

One of the core frameworks for community planners comes from the [International Association for Public Participation \(IAP2\)](#). With different chapters around the world, people who plan and facilitate engagement are able to share knowledge with each other. They also provide training so people can work towards being a certified “practitioner”. Their framework includes key foundations as well as a code of ethics, encouraging good and standard practice.

Part of the research for this report included taking IAP2’s Fundamentals course. Some of the key topics included:

- Public vs. stakeholders
- Importance of good event planning and communications principles
- Benefits, challenges, and assumptions about public participation
- A “spectrum” of engagement from less to more involved/influential
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion definitions and considerations
- Biases that facilitators may carry and should be mindful of
- Building trust with the audience

Meaningful engagement is defined by IAP2 as:

- Values based
- Goal driven
- Decision/impact oriented
- Equity centred
- Relationship focused

IAP2 is one of many approaches to engagement, but is one of the most widely accepted in Canadian planning. There is no blanket approach for any given community which is automatically effective, and part of a facilitator’s role is adapting the approach to create meaningful participation.

Facilitation best practices

The main goal of this report is to share some best practices for people working in the community planning realm. This could be used by students, working planners, or facilitators who work on planning projects. It may also be useful for facilitators in other industries.

The best practices in this report were gathered through online research, IAP2 training, and informational interviews conducted with planners. Interviewees came from public and private backgrounds, including cities, consultancies, and a university.

It is important to state that not all principles apply every time. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to engagement, and context is key to adapt the approach each time.

Start in a good way

The way you begin facilitating sets the tone, shows people who you are, and communicates what's happening to the participants. It may also be used to establish ground rules, goals, and logistical items like accessibility features, exits, washrooms, and refreshments. It is important to introduce yourself openly and energetically, and you may include some details about your position in relation to the topic at hand if appropriate. Most importantly, clearly state the purpose and expectations for the session, and check whether people understand.

Temperature check exercise:

This can be as simple as asking how people are feeling by raising 1–5 fingers, 1 being bad and 5 being great. If you are facilitating a group of technical subject matter experts, you may have them turn to the person next to them and answer the question, “what do people often misunderstand about my role?”

Territorial acknowledgement

Depending on the context of the session, you may plan to include a territorial acknowledgement. Sometimes there is preferred wording provided by your organization, or you may create it if appropriate. Always think intentionally about why you are doing an acknowledgement, and whether it is coming from an authentic and thoughtful place. There are varying opinions about the performativeness of these acknowledgements, and it is up to you (and perhaps the organization you're representing) to decide what is most appropriate for the context of your event.

Kwantlen Polytechnic University has a useful tool in their [Anti-Racism Pedagogy Toolkit](#) about personalizing acknowledgements.

Facilitation best practices

“Indigenous ways of knowing and being have taught us that land matters, and that conscious connections should be made between the event and the land on which the event is located.” ([SEU](#))

Ground rules

For some types of engagement like a workshop, you may choose to share some pre-made ground rules, or even co-create them with the participants. Ground rules are shared values which create a respectful environment for discussion and sharing, sometimes called a group agreement. It may even be as simple as sharing a couple bullets at the top of the session about your expectations, and asking whether those are okay with people.

Example ground rules:

- Raise your hand before speaking
- Be kind and respectful to others
- If you're feeling uncomfortable, you can leave at any time

Listening

People won't want to participate meaningfully if they don't feel they're being listened to. Active listening includes giving your full attention when someone is speaking, nodding, and paraphrasing back to them to show you heard them. You can also help people feel listened to after the event by sharing what you heard, and how it will be used.

Body language and position

The way we position and move our bodies communicates a lot to others. For example, sitting in the corner, slouching, and crossing your arms may convey you are disinterested or upset. Be thoughtful of how you move and where you are positioned. Facilitators can move around the room when appropriate, try to stay at eye level to help them feel comfortable, and try to position everyone in circles to create a more equal footing. You don't want people to feel surveilled. Appropriate body language and position may depend on the community or people you are facilitating – a good reason to know your audience.

Facilitators should also consider how they are dressed. When choosing an outfit, consider whether it will come off as intimidating or authoritative when it doesn't need to be.

Facilitation best practices

One interviewee often facilitates engagement with university students. They find that students seem more comfortable when they, the facilitator, is moving around and holding a coffee cup. It makes conversations less formal-seeming, and students are more likely to open up.

Refreshments

If it's in the budget, try to provide some drinks and food. Whether you're engaging with stakeholder groups, technical experts, or members of the public, most feel motivated by a hot cup of tea or a pastry! If you're providing a bigger meal, make sure to inquire about dietary needs, and have those meals labelled and separated.

Comfort with silence

You may pose a question to a group and not get any responses. Rather than panic, it's okay to sit in silence for a few moments. People may need time to think, or you may reflect and realize you need to re-phrase something. You may even build moments of silence into your session on purpose so people can think, breathe, or reflect.

Make room for different styles of learning, thinking, and communicating

Not everyone thinks or communicates the same way, and people come from different levels of understanding and ability. Facilitators can provide choices for how to participate, and even ask how people want to participate.

One interviewee was facilitating an engagement session where attendees were asked to write their ideas on sticky notes and put them on a wall. The facilitator noticed that one person was not writing anything down, so they approached the individual with their own stack of sticky notes and kindly asked if they wanted to transcribe their thoughts for them. This was welcomed, and the person was able to fully participate.

Facilitation best practices

Agenda flexibility

As part of event planning, there will sometimes be a set agenda of items and activities which will take place in order. As a facilitator, it is usually your role to transition between items and ensure things are running on time. It is respectful of peoples' time to stick within the advertised duration, as people often have other responsibilities to attend to afterwards. Try your best not to run over time. This may mean it's appropriate to be flexible with the agenda on the spot. It can be hard to keep track of time while facilitating, however, so see if a colleague can act as a time-keeper.

One of the only conflicting opinions I got between informational interviews was around sticking to the agenda. One planner feels that respecting peoples' time is paramount, and that if that means not getting to the entire agenda, that's okay. They also are more open to changing the agenda or methods of engagement as they go, reading the room and asking for feedback on the process. Another planner feels that sticking to an agenda, especially if it includes pre-made communications materials or presentations, is important for respecting the audience.

From my own professional experience planning and leading events and meetings, I fall somewhere in the middle. It is okay to leave a couple agenda items off if another one ends up being super productive, but it is also okay to tell people it's time to move

on so that we are being sensitive to the agenda. It really depends on the purpose and scale of the event; facilitators and event planners should carefully consider how flexible an event can be.

Breaks

Breaks are often built into a structured session agenda, but you should still keep a pulse on the energy in the room. If people seem like they may need a break, ask them.

You may even incorporate short moments where people can do some guided deep breaths or invite them to stand if they've been sitting for a while. Facilitators should think about nervous system regulation throughout the session, including how the setup of the whole space may influence people.

Ratios

Consider the ratio of staff to participants. If there's too many staff, it can feel intimidating or surveilling. Team members of higher seniority could leave during certain activities as not to influence the discussion or make people feel uncomfortable sharing their true thoughts.

Facilitation best practices

The venue and environment matters. Consider:

- A lack of windows or bright, harsh lighting may create a less comfortable environment; same goes for a room that's too hot or cold
- If it's hard to walk around between tables and reach engagement boards, people may feel stuck or awkward
- If appropriate, arrange people in circles so they may feel more equal

Vulnerability

Facilitators act in a professional capacity, but there is still a degree of vulnerability that can be shown to build trust. Lean into lived experiences, ask people about themselves, and tell them about you. Put yourselves in their shoes. Being vulnerable is a disarming way of connecting with others, promoting connection, centring their needs, and setting boundaries. For example, if you don't know the answer to a question, just say so. It is a form of reciprocity to be vulnerable.

Authenticity, transparency

When seeking engagement from the public or stakeholders, it's important to facilitate with openness, transparency, and inclusion. This can be done when you explain session objectives, planning issues, goals, timelines, and expectations. When you are transparent and authentic, others are more likely to express their thoughts, opinions, and concerns. Transparency can also come from how you share results after the session is complete.

Build relationships

Community planning is a small world, whether it's with your peers or members of the public. Always approach new interactions positively, and put effort into building good relationships. This can create long-term dialogue and reciprocity which benefits the outcome of planning for the community.

Trauma-informed

Facilitators play an important role in creating a comfortable and empowering space for engagement. Sometimes, people in the room have experiences of trauma or marginalization, and this can make certain activities or conversations difficult. At a high level, practicing facilitation from a trauma-informed lens means that their wellbeing is the biggest priority. SFU's [handbook](#) addresses this topic well.

Facilitation best practices

Know your audience

This may be the most fundamental communications principle, because it informs many different aspects of how things are planned and executed. For facilitation, knowing who you are engaging with can inform how much detail you share, language, session expectations, appropriate tone, and accessibility considerations.

“Different cultural conceptions of time such as punctuality, spontaneity, the pace of activities, the perception of urgency, and the importance of time management may shift the intended schedule of a session.” ([SEU](#))

Innovative and creative

There are many ways to do engagement in person (see page 18). Even with this variety, there’s always room to make creative modifications which best suit your topic and audience. Try making activities fun and interesting. Take risks and try something new that you heard about from another facilitator. Do online research to see how engagement is being done at the cutting

edge around the world and borrow ideas from it. Brainstorm and come up with your own new ideas, and attend other engagements to learn from observation.

Safe and brave spaces

We often hear the term “safe spaces”, but one interviewee poses the idea of creating “brave spaces”. We cannot control whether or not someone feels safe, so to promise a safe space is subjective. What we can control is our intention and effort to create a space where people feel brave or safe enough to participate. There is no perfect checklist, so planners and facilitators must look at the context each time. For example, it can come from creating ground rules, staying at eye level, physical safety, respect, trauma-informed practice, a quiet space in a separate room, or how the facilitator is dressed. You can have a safe and brave space and still have hard conversations.



Photo credit: Alexandra Taylor

Facilitation best practices

Facilitator safety

It is critical that facilitators feel safe. There may be situations which are awkward or slightly uncomfortable, which is normal, but when it crosses the line to feeling unsafe, you do not have to continue. It is okay to stop and leave if you feel unsafe. If you have colleagues with you, lean on them for support. If you are alone, it's still okay to stop if you are in an unsafe situation. As a point of preparation, you can discuss with your team ahead of time what you will do in this sort of situation.

Equality vs. equity

Equality means providing people with equal treatment or resources, but facilitators should aim to centre equity (IAP2). Equity means putting people on equal footing no matter where each person starts, allowing people to be heard, included, safe, and able to connect. Positionality and power is key. For facilitators, power can mean the ability to influence others in the room. They can also influence what power structures are broken down and which are reinforced during engagement. You can do simple things to provide opportunities for equity, like having different options for participating or having a translator, for example.

Accessibility considerations

Tightly related to equity is accessibility. This can include the location and setup of a room, but is also a continuous consideration throughout a session. Examples have been shared throughout this report. Beyond facilitation alone, the City of Vancouver has [several resources](#) on planning accessible in-person events.

“Honouring accessibility needs allows facilitators to better care for the needs of the group. Whenever possible, spend time with participants beforehand in order to break down perceived barriers.” ([SFU](#))

Facilitation best practices

End in a good way

The way you end a facilitation is similarly important to how you start. It's a time to summarize information, and communicate how it will (or will not) be used. If there are future opportunities for people to engage on a particular project, that should be said too. You may even pose some actions for the participants as they venture back into their communities or to their stakeholder groups.

If a session did not meet all of the set objectives or had some major challenges, it doesn't need to be viewed as a failure. Engagement is a process, and in itself can be seen as a deliverable or an achievement. There's always something to learn from facilitating, even if you need to re-think your approach or try again. As long as you were trying your best and acting in good faith, it's not a failure.

After the session is complete, you as the facilitator should reflect on what went well and what didn't so you can improve your practice. You may even feel comfortable asking participants at the very end how they

felt about your facilitation. Once the information or results from the session is analyzed and reported on, try to share it with participants whenever possible. This closes the loop, builds trust, and shows them how they contributed to the community planning process.

Learn as you go

While this handbook aims to provide some key advice for training facilitators in community planning, it's important to note the importance of practice. Facilitators each develop a unique set of tools and personal style over time. You learn from what went well and what didn't. For example, you can seek feedback from the group you ran a workshop with and see if they have any suggestions for how you could improve as a facilitator. Time and self-reflection will ultimately nurture your professional development.

WHAT'S IN YOUR BAG?



There are a few materials that are good to have on hand. And don't forget your personal care items! (Marina Miller, 2026)

When things go wrong

As with any kind of in-person gathering, there will likely be some sort of challenge, disruption, issue, or even conflict. But, "if dealt with skillfully, can be a generative opportunity for deepening understanding, strengthening relationships and fostering growth among the group" ([SFU](#)).

Let's consider a scenario which happens sometimes in community planning engagements: During a large group discussion, one individual has been raising their hand multiple times to speak, and is taking up a lot more time than others in the room.

I have been planning events for several years, up to the scale of a 130+ person conference. Something I learned to do in a Project Management course is to create a risk matrix. I brainstorm all potential things which could go wrong, rank how big of an impact that would have on the event, and come up with strategies to prevent or mitigate them. Then, I create action items for those strategies.

One way to tackle this as a facilitator could be to call it out, but not in a targeted way. You could say to the room, "I notice that some folks have had a chance to share a lot so far, and I would like to invite folks who have not yet shared, to speak up and offer your perspectives" ([SFU](#)).

Behaviour management is a big part of a facilitator's role. It is a skill gained over time after meeting many different people and working on many types of projects, but there are some key principles which new facilitators can keep in mind. Some of these echo the best practices section:

- Validate and name the emotions in the room, and perhaps your own discomfort
- Look for solutions together, or in a 1:1 conversation if appropriate
- Be vulnerable, kind, and open
- Be flexible and creative

Engagement methods

There are many different in-person engagement methods used in community planning, most of which involve a facilitator. Below is a non-exhaustive list of examples:

- **Public Meeting:** Facilitator encourages two-way communication, and a recorder writes down suggestions and issues that are discussed.
- **Focus Group:** 6 to 10 people discuss their opinions on a well-framed topic. The facilitator poses open questions and allows for follow-ups.
- **Open House and Pop-ups:** Held in a strategic public location, information on a topic is presented in a simple, sometimes fun way, and people can learn and share their thoughts with staff.
- **Workshop:** Led by a facilitator(s), 10–40 people work through issues or develop potential solutions through discussions and presentations.
- **World Café:** This is an example where the responsibility/power weighs mostly on the attendees (i.e. “leaderless”) but a facilitator still guides attendees on each phase of the activity. Importantly, after each round of discussion, some people stay at their table, and some rotate.
- **Design Charette:** Intensive session where designers, community members, and decision-makers come up with visions for design and development.

- **Working Groups:** 10–15 people who meet regularly in a collaborative way to make recommendations on a topic, with a facilitator who is not acting as a subject matter expert.

The above examples are the session type, rather than the specific engagement activities which may be used during it (though sometimes there’s overlap in the terminology). Activities that a facilitator runs could include things like:

- Writing on sticky notes and placing them under prompts on a wall
- Placing coloured stickers on images to indicate opinions on certain elements of a design or plan
- Snowball: Writing anonymous ideas on paper, crumpling them up and throwing them around the room so others can read them out loud
- Spider web: Throwing a ball of yarn to one person at a time, each answering a prompt. The string forms a fun “web”.

There are many websites and forums where you can find lists of ideas like this, with detailed instructions. A key source for this section was the [Tamarack Institute Index of Community Engagement](#).

Communication is key



Photo credit: City of Burnaby

There is often a disconnect between professional planning skills and communication skills, but they are tightly interlinked. At every step of a planning process, and at any level of participation, thoughtful communication is key to success. When not well thought-out, or done inappropriately, it can mean that plans do not reflect the community well enough.

The principles of communications and event planning can be applied to engagement facilitation, and often overlap. Bad communication in facilitation can lead to misunderstandings and ultimately undermine the goals of the session.

"The facilitator is someone who not only sets up expectations for communication, but who also is meant to model respectful dialogic practices." ([SEU](#))

Most of the work is done before you leave your front door for the event. Planning ahead involves working with internal and external teams, scoping the project, creating visual and written materials, communicating event registration, understanding contexts and existing group dynamics, audio/visual setup, catering coordination, defining goals, and designing the session itself, just to name a few.

Communication is key

There are many communications principles mentioned throughout this handbook, including and in addition to:

- Always considering who your audience is.
- Using appropriate levels of plain language in your presentations, written materials, and discussions.
- Considering the public relations risks of an event, and planning accordingly. For example, having some prepared answers for tricky questions you may get from the audience.
- Always disclosing how audience feedback, images, and videos are being recorded, shared, and used.
- Ensuring people know how to get to the event, and its accessibility features.
- Facilitators should always work to improve their public speaking skills. Being present, engaged, and well-spoken goes a long way when facilitating a group.

During my planning education, several professionals have mentioned the importance of communication. Having worked as a communications professional for several years myself, closing the gap between effective communications and effective community planning is an intriguing challenge. Coincidentally, this was a keynote topic at the 2026 PIBC conference, delivered by urban communicator extraordinaire Uytæe Lee.

Facilitator's checklist

Assuming effort has been put into the actual event planning, you can make these personal checks as a facilitator:

Before the engagement

- Try to get a good night's sleep
- Have a good meal, or do some other form of self-care before you leave
- Have you packed everything you need?
- Arrive early to make sure everything is properly set up
- Note where the exits and washrooms are
- Do you know what the purpose and expectations are for the session?

After the engagement

- Ask for feedback
- Reflect on how you did. What did you learn? How could you improve?
- Report on the results
- Share results and feedback with the attendees to close the loop
- Share feedback with your internal team

During the engagement

- Clearly state the purpose and expectations to the audience
- Share who you are, and do a territorial acknowledgement if appropriate
- Are we setting ground rules?
- Are you actively listening?
- Are you reading the room? Being inclusive, present, and accessible?
- What is your body language communicating?
- Do people seem comfortable?
- Have you given adequate breaks?
- Are people getting equitable opportunities to participate?
- Do you feel safe?
- Are we running over time on certain agenda items? Do we need to move on or adjust?

Conclusion

While there is a lot of necessary technical and scientific work that goes into community planning, there is an artistic side to it as well. We cannot forget the human side of planning which requires facilitation, event planning, and communication. Facilitators have the power to create welcoming, lively spaces for education and collaboration. They are key players in the planning process, bringing community needs to decision-makers. People may not remember the details of an engagement session, but they will remember how you made them feel.

This report has aimed to define what in-person facilitation looks like in the planning process, and provided some best practices. These tips were largely sourced from one-on-one interviews with planners, and supplemented by useful documents like [SFU's](#).

Facilitation should be treated with great responsibility, diligence, and continuous learning. For each learner, the journey is completely unique. Your style and skills can only be defined through practice, but hopefully this handbook is a good reference point for self-reflection and improvement.



About the author

My name is Marina Miller (she/her). I grew up in beautiful Burnaby, British Columbia. I currently live in its neighbouring city, Vancouver, and also spent two years working in London, United Kingdom. My love for community planning, particularly in cities, came from growing up in the rapidly transforming neighbourhood of Metrotown. I am continually inspired and motivated by this beautiful region, which is on the unceded, traditional territories of many Coast Salish peoples. My hometowns of Burnaby and Vancouver are on the territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. [Unceded](#) means that the land was never legally ceded or given up through a treaty or other agreement.

In high school I had influential teachers who inspired me to study geography and the environment, and to approach them from a social justice lens. During my degree at Simon Fraser University, I explored global systems both scientifically and artistically, and made a personal commitment to act and stand in solidarity with those who face discrimination and oppression. My relatives immigrated from Europe within the last century, sharing their traditions and bits of their language with my sister and I. They are a big part of why I am so curious about the world, other cultures, and history. I love living here, but I know how much injustice still occurs at every scale. I believe I have approached my urban planning education thus far in a mindful, intersectional way, and



I am committed to keep learning and listening. I am a white settler, a queer woman, and my community includes family, friends, and the city.

For the past five years I have worked as a communications and marketing professional, learning how to translate technical information and make it approachable for many audiences. I've realized during my program at Langara that there are a lot of communications principles which can greatly benefit community planning. With my career shift, I hope to use and develop my skills as a communicator to help create healthy, vibrant, and well-informed communities.

About the author

It is important that any reader of this report understands my position, and that my own unconscious biases may be reflected in the work. I acknowledge limitations in the research which contributed to this report, such as a limited geography and sample size of informational interviews.

Self-locating myself in writing like this was taught to me by both Indigenous and settler scholars while completing my undergrad at SFU. I want to acknowledge one in particular: Cliff Atleo, a Tsimshian (Kitsumkalum/Kitselas) and Nuuchahnulth (Ahouasht) scholar. He challenged me to be mindful of my position in the world as I learn, research, work, and build relationships. I have carried that since, and am grateful that he supported my ambition to study community planning.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to read this report. I had my Langara classmates in mind when creating this major project, trying to create a simple, clear resource for new facilitators in the community planning field.

Please connect with me on [LinkedIn](#) and [my website](#), where I often write about planning topics.



Photo credit: Olive Summers

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