

ELECTED OFFICIALS ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

ROCHESTER, MN



BETTER PUBLIC MEETINGS



Democracy
Innovation

PURPOSE

Based on the Better Public Meetings civic infrastructure scan recommendations, community forum input and study session reflections, the following Elected Officials Engagement Framework establishes a coordinated approach to how elected officials connect with residents across settings and over time. The framework is intended to move engagement from occasional participation to a sustained and visible presence in the community. It aligns outreach, public participation, and dialogue-based decision-making practices into a consistent direction that supports relationship-building, transparency, and informed decision-making. This framework recognizes that trust and participation are strengthened when residents experience regular contact with elected officials, clear opportunities to contribute input, and visible follow-up on community conversations. By implementing this Framework through the creation and sharing of engagement tools, the city of Rochester can reinforce predictable expectations for both officials and residents while maintaining flexibility.

IMPLEMENTATION

We recommend that the City of Rochester pursue a supportive, relationship-based engagement approach to position elected officials as accessible, visible, and frequently connected to the community. As part of this approach, we recommend that the City establish certain tools and protocols to promote engagement, all of which are drawn from community input (as detailed in the Civic Scan). Suggestions for these tools are included in this framework and listed as **recommended tools** in the accompanying diagrams. These shared assets will ensure that engagement is consistent, accessible, and manageable for both officials and residents.

CORE OBJECTIVES

The pilot framework is designed to achieve the following objectives:

- Support elected officials in building trust through consistent interaction with residents in both formal and informal settings.
- Reach a broader range of residents by providing multiple engagement pathways across formats (in-person, digital, dialogue-based) and venues (mayor, city council, commissions)
- Create opportunities for learning, discussion, and reflection that support more informed and transparent decision-making.
- Develop shared standards and expectations that guide how engagement activities are planned, delivered, and followed-up.

FRAMEWORK COMPONENTS

The following activities bring together several complementary engagement practices into a coordinated capability set. Each component feeds into a common direction of continuous engagement and public presence.

1 - Personal Outreach and Community Presence

This component supports elected officials in maintaining regular contact with residents outside formal meetings. Outreach activities should be supported by practical tools, such as digital and traditional contact methods, as well as guidance on follow-up communication. These tools should enable officials to build sustained outreach efforts and touch points with residents. Implementation should include establishing and maintaining targeted outreach lists, setting a predictable event cadence, and applying a consistent follow-up process after engagement activities. These practices could be documented in an Outreach Playbook.

2 - Community-Based Engagement through Pop-Ups and Events

This component emphasizes meeting residents where they already gather at existing community events and public spaces to reduce barriers to participation and increase accessibility. Staff can support elected officials by leveraging engagement schedules to maintain a regular presence at community events. Partnerships with local organizations can help identify appropriate venues and align engagement with community priorities. Implementation should include developing a standard pop-up engagement kit, coordinating an official rotation schedule for community events utilizing a calendar, and establishing partnerships with community organizations to support participation. Highly visible officials such as the mayor would play a key role at these events in educating citizens on the best channels for public input.

3 - Digital Engagement and Community Panel Participation

This component establishes a continuous digital channel for communication and feedback. A standing community panel provides a reliable group of residents who can participate in surveys, consultations, and pilot initiatives. Digital engagement tools should be used to share updates, gather input, communicate outcomes in a timely manner, and even do outreach. The goal is to continuously build a recurring base of representative residents interested in engagement activities.

Implementation should include recruiting and maintaining a standing community panel using an approved engagement platform – IndiGov or ActiVote, establishing communication routines, and tracking participation and response patterns over time. The panel should support recruitment efforts while establishing participation expectations and reasonable communication schedules.

4 - Town Hall and Public Meeting Design Standards

This component focuses on improving the structure and quality of town halls. Meetings should be designed to encourage dialogue, participation, and accessibility. Standard design elements should include facilitated discussions, clear agendas, and structured follow-up communication. These practices can be provided through training and best practices to help ensure elected officials enable residents to feel heard and understand how their input contributes to decisions. Implementation should include providing facilitation training for elected officials, applying standardized meeting formats that support small-group discussion and question-and-answer sessions, and using inclusion and outreach checklists to guide planning. A Town Hall Design Guide can support consistent delivery of dialogue-based meetings across constituencies.

5 - Deliberative Study Sessions for Decision Preparation

This component introduces structured learning and discussion opportunities for elected officials and participants prior to major decisions. Study sessions provide time for reflection, information sharing, and thoughtful dialogue. These sessions should focus on complex or emerging issues that require a deeper understanding. By creating space for discussion before decisions are made, the municipality can improve clarity of decisions and public confidence. Implementation should include scheduling topic-focused study sessions in advance of major decisions, preparing briefing materials to support informed discussion, and training departmental staff for roundtable facilitation. The event should be structured with a presentation and with invited participants.

6 - Feedback Loop System

This component ensures that public input is visible, acknowledged, and, where applicable, connected to decisions. It addresses one of the most common gaps in engagement systems: consistent follow-up after participation. Implementation should include the preparation of concise summaries of community input, supported where appropriate by digital or AI-assisted tools. These summaries should be shared through newsletters, public communications, or direct follow-up messages to participants. Officials and staff should communicate what was heard, what actions are being considered, and what steps will follow. These processes could be outlined in a feedback loop protocol.

7 - Council-Commission Alignment System

This component strengthens coordination between governing bodies and advisory groups to ensure consistent communication and policy continuity. Clear alignment between the council and commissions helps improve the flow of information across governance structures. Implementation should include the designation of liaison roles to communicate commission guidance to both the city council and the mayor's office. These liaisons could further promote the distribution of shared training materials and establishment of a standardized reporting cadence. Regular communication routines should be supported by clear documentation and accessible scheduling tools.

8 - Scaled Co-Design Model

This component introduces a flexible approach to the "Community Co-Design" process in which residents, especially from underrepresented groups, are compensated for sharing expertise and perspectives. While this process produced much richer engagement and feedback than a public comment, the cost of these intensive projects limit their use for smaller projects. A scaled model allows participation to occur more frequently and more efficiently. Implementation should include focused co-design sessions that leverage trusted community connectors and local networks. The City could capture the principles of this scaled model in Mini Co-Design Toolkit.

9 - Peer Learning Network for Officials

This component supports ongoing learning and collaboration among elected officials while maintaining transparency and compliance with governance requirements. Peer learning opportunities help officials share experiences, discuss challenges, and adopt effective practices. Implementation should include quarterly facilitated learning sessions, case discussions, topic briefings, and documentation of lessons learned.

A COORDINATED APPROACH

The framework positions components to operate as a coordinated system rather than as independent initiatives. Personal outreach and community presence build relationships. This can be facilitated through pop-up engagement activities, hosting individual town halls, building out and drawing upon a community survey panel for outreach and input, and hosting more formal deliberative study sessions, which strengthen positive interactions – beyond public comments - in public meeting spaces.

To support successful implementation, the City of Rochester should focus on the following enabling conditions: the mayor, senior leadership and elected officials should model consistent engagement practices, educate the public about pathways for community input, and reinforce expectations for participation. Officials (and staff as needed) should receive practical guidance and training on outreach, facilitation, and communication practices. Engagement activities should be planned collaboratively to ensure coverage across neighborhoods and events. Engagement outcomes should be recorded and communicated to participants to demonstrate accountability and transparency.

The municipality should monitor early signals that the framework is taking hold in practice. These indicators may include:

- Increased participation from residents who have not previously engaged.
- More frequent informal interactions between officials and residents.
- Improved attendance at community events and public meetings.
- Positive feedback from participants about accessibility and communication, and factoring in public input.
- Evidence of consistent follow-up after engagement activities and sharing of examples between officials.

THE ROLE OF THE NCL

Throughout the implementation phase of the Better Public Meetings project, the National Civic League can advise the City of Rochester on how best to implement any of the components of this framework.

In terms of direct assistance, the League will prepare an Outreach Playbook and a Town Hall Design Guide (**Components 1 and 4**) and facilitate a Deliberative Study Session (**Component 5**)

Framework Components

Civic Scan Recommendation

Lead Civic Culture Through Visibility and Relationship-Building

Outreach Strategy

Goal: Build officials' capacity to communicate with residents
Activities: Rotating neighborhood presence; outreach lists; follow-up protocols.
Recommended tool: Outreach Playbook

Reduce Practical Barriers to Participation

Community Events

Goal: Officials boost participation by attending informal events
Activities: Maintain an events schedule; partner with community organizations.
Recommended tool: Pop-up Engagement Calendar

Invite Public Engagement Earlier in the Decision Cycle

Digital Channels & Panels

Goal: Create a continuous engagement channel
Activities: Recruit a standing panel using ActiVote or IndiGov
Recommended tool: Digital Community Panels via ActiVote or IndiGov

Improve Timing, Accessibility, and Clarity of Civic Information

Town Hall Design

Goal: Create a framework for dialogue-based official town halls
Activities: Small-group discussions; facilitated Q&A; inclusion and outreach checklist; follow-up communications.
Recommended tool: Town Hall Design Guide

Evolve Meeting Formats to Support Dialogue and Learning

Delib. Study Session

Goal: Create learning-based decision spaces
Activities: Topic based, staff-facilitated dialogues with targeted public invitations.
Recommended tool: Deliberative Study Session Event

Make Public Input Visible and Close the Feedback Loop

Feedback Loop

Goal: Make input and follow-up visible to improve trust
Activities: Use AI to produce summaries; following up on feedback in newsletters, city communications, and over email.
Recommended tool: Public Feedback Loop Protocol

Strengthen Pathways from Engagement to Decision-Making

Commission Integration

Goal: Strengthen coordination between governance bodies
Activities: Create liaisons to communicate commission guidance; circulate training materials; standardize reporting schedule.
Recommended tool: Commission Integration Plan

Sustain and Scale Co-Design Model

Co-Design Model

Goal: Apply co-design to smaller projects
Activities: Mini co-design; leverage community connectors to identify representative participants.
Recommended tool: Mini Co-Design Toolkit

Support Youth, Newcomers, and Emerging Civic Leaders

Peer Learning

Goal: Share lessons among officials while maintaining compliance
Activities: Facilitated learning sessions; case sharing; topic briefings; documentation process.
Recommended tool: Peer Learning Efforts

Reinforce Norms of Respect, Safety, and Belonging

This framework builds on the civic infrastructure scan holistically. Not all linkages between recommendations and components are explicitly shown above.

Framework Component	Purpose	Activities	Recommended Tools
Outreach Strategy	Build officials' capacity to communicate with residents outside formal meetings	Rotating neighborhood presence; outreach lists; setting an intentional cadence of events; follow-up processes	Outreach Playbook for elected officials
Community Engagement	Officials meet residents at city events, using informal engagement to try to increase participation	Pop-up engagement kit; rotating schedule for officials to attend events; partnerships with community organizations	Pop-Up Engagement Calendar
Digital Channels and Panels	Create a continuous engagement channel for residents	Recruit a standing panel using ActiVote or IndiGov	Digital Community Panels
Town Hall Design	Provide a framework for dialogue-based, official townhall to improve participation	Small-group discussions; facilitated Q&A; inclusion and outreach checklists; follow-up communications	Town Hall Design Guide
Deliberative Study Session	Create learning-based decision spaces to improve decision quality and understanding	Topic-based, staff-facilitated dialogue with targeted public invitations	Deliberative Study Session Event
Feedback Loop Plan	Make input and follow-up visible to improve trust in decision-making	Use AI to produce summaries; follow-up newsletters, city communications, an emails	Public Feedback Loop Protocol
Commission Integration	Strengthen coordination between governance bodies to improve policy alignment	Create liaisons to communicate commission guidance; circulate training materials; standardize reporting schedule	Commission Integration Plan
Co-Design Model	Gauge viability of using co-design on smaller projects	Mini co-design; leverage community connectors to identify representative participants	Mini Co-Design Toolkit
Peer Learning	Share lessons to improve leadership capacity and collaboration while maintaining compliance	Facilitated learning sessions; case sharing; topic briefings; documentation process	Peer Learning Efforts