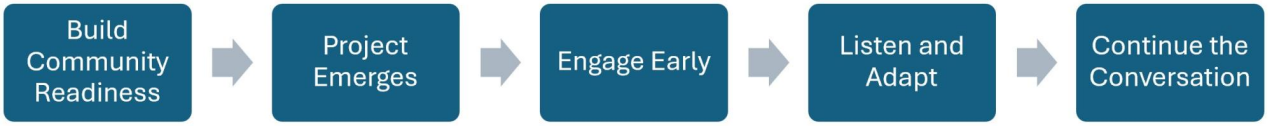
Best Practices for Early Community Engagement in CHIP

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Strong community engagement begins long before a CHIP application is submitted. In fact, some of the most important conversations happen before a developer proposes a project. By building a shared understanding of local housing needs, preparing municipal leaders, and engaging residents early, municipalities can create a stronger foundation for future housing projects.

Once a project emerges, those early conversations make it easier to answer questions, address concerns, and build trust. The following practices can help municipalities prepare their communities before opportunities arise and continue meaningful engagement as projects move from an idea to a formal proposal.

Community engagement is not a single event. It is an ongoing process that begins before a project is proposed and continues throughout planning, review, and implementation. The graphic below shows how community engagement evolves as a CHIP project moves from an idea to reality.



Lay The Groundwork Before a Project Emerges

Early community engagement begins by building a shared understanding of the community's housing needs, goals, and the role CHIP could play. Communities that invest time in these conversations before a project is proposed are better prepared to evaluate opportunities, answer questions, and make informed decisions.

Start Before There is a Project

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Communities do not need to wait until a developer requests CHIP assistance before preparing. Instead, municipalities can:

- Build partnerships with community organizations.
- Develop a shared understanding of local housing needs.
- Learn about CHIP and whether it's a tool the community wants to use.
- Become familiar with the agreements, policies, and tools commonly used in housing projects.

Preparing in advance helps municipalities respond more confidently when development opportunities arise.

Start with Your Community's Vision

Many communities already have groups that discuss housing, planning, or economic development. Planning commissions, housing committees, and other advisory groups are good places to begin these conversations.

These groups can:

- Discuss local housing needs and opportunities.
- Build agreement around shared housing goals.
- Develop recommendations before projects reach the Selectboard or other formal decision-making bodies.

Organizations such as the Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD) can also help communities facilitate conversations, identify shared priorities, and

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involve a broad range of voices.

Build Understanding Within the Municipality First

Before asking the public to support a project, municipal leaders and staff should have a shared understanding of the community's housing goals and how CHIP could help achieve them.

Discuss questions such as:

- Why does the community need more housing?
- What housing goals is the municipality trying to achieve?
- How could CHIP support those goals?
- Who will serve as the municipal point person?

When staff, board members, and committee members understand these basics, they can answer questions consistently and confidently.

Use More Than Public Meetings

Public meetings are important, but they are only one part of community engagement. Visiting existing community groups, holding small listening sessions, arranging one-on-one conversations, and sharing updates through your website, newsletters and/or social media can often reach people who may not attend a formal meeting.



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These conversations allow residents to ask questions, express concerns, and learn about housing needs in a more comfortable setting. They also help municipal leaders identify concerns before they become larger issues.

Work Through Trusted Community Partners

Residents often learn about community issues from organizations and people they already know and trust. Local employers, nonprofit organizations, housing committees, business groups, faith communities, and regional partners can help broaden conversations and reach people who may not otherwise participate.

Trusted partners can help explain why housing matters, encourage participation, and reinforce that the conversation is about community goals - not a specific development proposal.

Be Ready for Opportunity

Preparing before a project emerges allows municipalities to establish a shared vision, build community understanding, and organize internally before important decisions must be made. When a housing proposal does emerge, municipal leaders can spend less time explaining why housing matters and more time working with residents to evaluate how a specific project supports the community's goals.

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Engage the Community as Projects Emerge

Once a housing project emerges, community engagement becomes more focused. Although many project details may still be evolving, this is often the best time to build trust, answer questions, and gather meaningful feedback. The key is to communicate clearly, listen carefully, and set realistic expectations.

Involve the Right People Early

- Identify key stakeholders, including neighbors, businesses, municipal boards, and regional partners.
- Include voices that are often underrepresented.
- Coordinate communication among municipal staff, elected officials, and the developer.

Early coordination reduces confusion and helps everyone share consistent information.

Engage Early and Set Expectations

- Begin community conversations while ideas are still taking shape.



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- Explain that the project is in its early stages and that community input can influence future decisions.
- Avoid presenting early concepts as final plans.

Early engagement helps residents feel they have an opportunity to shape the project.

Explain the "Why"

Before discussing design or financing, help residents understand the problem the project is intended to solve. Connect the discussion to the municipality's housing goals, town plan, or other planning documents.

Examples may include:

- Addressing housing shortages.
- Supporting downtown revitalization.
- Improving infrastructure.
- Strengthening the local workforce.

When people understand the purpose of a project, they are better able to evaluate its potential benefits and impacts.

Use Early Financial Information to Explain the Project

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Simple examples and conservative financial projections can help explain:

- How property tax revenues may change over time.
- How tax increment financing works.
- How existing tax revenues continue to support current municipal services.
- How new utility customers may strengthen water or wastewater systems.

Early financial information does not need to be perfect. It is a planning tool that helps residents understand possible outcomes and ask informed questions.

Be Honest About What's Known

- Explain the project in plain language.
- Clearly identify what has been decided and what is still being evaluated.
- Be honest when information is not yet available.

People are more likely to trust a process that is open about uncertainty.

Explain the CHIP Process

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Help residents understand:

- What CHIP is and how it works.
- What CHIP can and cannot fund.
- How decisions will be made and how the municipality is protected.

Because CHIP and tax increment financing can be unfamiliar, simple explanations help reduce confusion and misinformation.

Be Transparent About Trade-Offs

- Discuss both the benefits and potential impacts of the project.
- Explain why public investment may be needed.
- Avoid overly technical language or unrealistic promises.

Balanced information builds credibility.

Use Clear, Visual Communication

- Share maps, diagrams, and plain-language summaries.
- Limit the use of technical reports during early conversations.
- Make information easy to find and understand.

Clear communication reduces misunderstandings.

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Focus on Listening

The goal of early engagement is to understand community concerns and priorities—not to persuade people that a project is already complete.

- Ask open-ended questions.
- Look for common themes.
- Avoid making promises that cannot be kept.

Listening early helps municipalities identify issues while there is still time to respond.

Close the Feedback Loop

People want to know their input matters.

- Share what you heard.
- Explain what changed because of community feedback.
- When suggestions cannot be incorporated, explain why.

Closing the feedback loop is one of the strongest ways to build trust.

Pace the Process Thoughtfully



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- Allow enough time for meaningful input.
- Avoid rushing key conversations.
- Share a clear timeline so people know what to expect.

Predictability reduces anxiety and opposition.

Keep the Conversation Going

Community engagement should continue throughout the project.

- Provide regular updates.
- Share new information as it becomes available.
- Invite additional questions and feedback.

Ongoing communication prevents surprises and strengthens long-term trust.

Building Trust Throughout the Project

Every community engagement strategy will look a little different because every project and every community is different. Successful engagement consistently shares the same qualities: clear communication, transparency, thoughtful listening, and meaningful opportunities for participation. By creating these opportunities early and continuing them throughout the project, municipalities can build trust, improve project outcomes, and help residents understand how a proposed housing project supports the community's long-term goals.

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Building Community Confidence

Community engagement is not a single meeting or presentation. It is an ongoing process that begins long before a project is proposed and continues throughout planning, review, and implementation. By preparing early, communicating openly, and listening carefully, municipalities can reduce uncertainty, strengthen relationships, and build community confidence in the decisions they make. Investing in these conversations before and during a CHIP project helps create better projects, stronger partnerships, and housing that reflects the community's vision for the future.

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