



# Community Engagement and Stewardship

## Urban Forested Natural Area Roadmaps



### **Introduction**

The Community Engagement and Stewardship roadmap is a guide for understanding and effectively engaging the community or communities you serve. This roadmap provides guidance on getting to know your community and creating public programming to activate your natural spaces by bringing people into these spaces in a variety of ways including active recreation, passive recreation, stewardship, and more. Community engagement is best conducted by multiple stakeholders including governmental, nonprofit, and grassroots organizations. A multifaceted collaborative approach will likely be necessary to reach different audiences.



The following are some key considerations for community engagement and stewardship in urban forested natural areas. Your process may not occur in the order listed; this is a cyclical process with contextual considerations.

### **Urban Forested Natural Area Roadmaps**

These roadmaps provide guidance for local organizations across the country to protect, restore, maintain, and increase access to millions of acres of urban forested natural areas. Informed by the experience of the [Forests in Cities Network](#), over 40 practitioners from 20 cities around the country contributed to their development.

To access the other roadmaps visit [fic.naturalareasnyc.org](https://fic.naturalareasnyc.org).

# Before Community Engagement

## **Define scale**

Clearly identify the geographic boundaries of the community or communities you are trying to reach, and note ways it crosses other political jurisdictions. Your scope of work might include the immediate area [surrounding a forested natural area](#), [a neighborhood](#), or [a whole city](#). Defining these boundaries helps set realistic expectations and achievable goals, while ensuring that outreach efforts remain intentional and effective. Community definitions should be flexible, and asking the community to define itself is a best practice.

## **Define Goals**

Community engagement requires resources and relies on the valuable time of community members. Determine the goals for your community engagement and stewardship to ensure that you are making the most from these interactions. For example, your goal may be to increase community use of natural areas, or gather community input on forest management. You can also ask the community to help determine the goals of your community engagement and stewardship.

- Community engagement and stewardship is not free. Ensure there is dedicated funding and outreach resources in line with your goals.
- Conducting outreach to the community and providing public programming requires paid staff with expertise. Delineate what tasks paid staff will perform and which work will be performed by volunteers, academic partners, or contractors.



## **Gather background information**

Doing research to find out the characteristics of your community can help hone your outreach efforts. This may include demographic data (age, language, income, cultural background), social factors (community networks, faith groups, schools), community needs, and existing patterns of park or natural area use. Understanding these characteristics helps tailor programming so it is more inclusive, relevant, and effective. Note that collecting community data is different from collecting ecological data; communities may have concerns about privacy and sharing information, and you should always have requisite permissions, whether that is from your Institutional Review Board or in-house community engagement experts.

# **Conducting Community Engagement**

## **Identify stakeholders and build partnerships**

Most communities have certain people and organizations with outsized influence both within natural areas and in general, such as local nonprofits, neighborhood associations, schools, faith groups, elected officials, affinity groups, or highly active individual volunteers. Getting to know them is a great way to tap into specific communities and the larger community. Take time to meet with them and attend their events. Make a living document of local partner organizations/individuals and their roles, in order to easily coordinate with them in the future.

## **Engage the whole community**

Be sure to go past your typical partners and reach out to the whole community. Note: people have a variety of experiences and opinions about natural spaces including histories of exclusion. It is best to ask who is not currently at the table, and be sure to include voices from underrepresented groups. See [resources on inclusive engagement](#) for more information and examples.

## **Create diverse programming**

People use and interpret forested natural areas in a variety of ways. Where appropriate, co-create programs that support self-directed community action or [stewardship](#), aligned with the idea that community-led initiatives can themselves be restorative practices. Solicit ideas for programming and stewardship goals from the community. Some examples include:

- Stewardship programs that cater to a variety of skillsets and abilities
- Visioning sessions to gather ideas
- Advocacy for forested natural areas
- Community science and climate change
- Interpretive walks and educational programs
- Cultural events
- Art, poetry, and storytelling



## **Provide resources**

To build trust and community capacity, determine how to get funding and other resources—such as data or training—in the hands of community members caring for or providing programming in forested natural areas. Consider applying for funding alongside smaller organizations that may not have the capacity to apply for grants alone.

## **Make your programming accessible**

If your programming is [engaging and accessible](#) to people with different abilities, language skills, cultural needs, and ages, then you will reach more of the community. Some things to consider include:

- Ask your stakeholders what their needs are and how to make programs accessible.
- Build partnerships with groups that are currently underrepresented in your programming.
- Provide translation and interpretation in languages that your community speaks.
- Use inclusive language that avoids violent, colonial, or anti-immigrant metaphors—especially when discussing species change or environmental degradation.
- Provide childcare, refreshments, and potentially stipends for your programming.
- Vary the timing of your events to make them accessible for different audiences.
- Provide virtual programming.

## **Advertise your work and programming**

Marketing your programming is essential—people can't attend an event they don't know about. A clear marketing strategy creates successful outreach and engagement. Sharing materials such as newsletter articles, social media posts, and printed flyers not only increases visibility for your organization but also drives greater participation in your events.



# After Community Engagement

## **Evaluate your programming and improve**

Gathering feedback from participants and even those who choose not to participate can help to make sure you are reaching the right audiences with programming they enjoy. For example, create post-event feedback forms to collect information from participants after stewardship events. Regular evaluation of volunteer numbers and work achieved can ensure that stewardship programs remain effective and aligned with both ecological and community goals. Circle back to share outcomes, results, and how feedback will shape your future programming.



## **Access the Other Roadmaps**

- [Management Planning](#)
- [Mapping](#)
- [Ordinances, Laws, and Policies](#)
- [Assessing and Monitoring](#)
- [Trails and Public Access](#)