

Community Engagement and Communication

Public Comment:

More industrial projects fail because of community opposition than because of engineering or financial challenges.

Across the Detroit Region, and the Midwest more broadly, the pattern is familiar—a project is announced, neighbors learn about it from a news article or a social media post, opposition organizes around fear and uncertainty, and the public hearing becomes a referendum on the project rather than a conversation about it. By that point, the outcome often has less to do with the merits of the project than with how the process was handled.

Community engagement is not a box to check, but rather a core strategy for getting industrial projects built. Done well, it builds the public trust and political support that carry a project through approval and beyond.

The following tools outline the ways in which engagement efforts can successfully be carried out throughout the industrial development process.

Click on the tool to learn more:

[*3. Conducting Exploratory Meetings*](#)

[*4. Facilitating an Effective Open House*](#)

[*11. Conducting a Successful Public Meeting*](#)

[*12. Project Communications, FOIAs, and NDAs*](#)

[*16. Communicating During Construction*](#)

What Communities and Developers Should Know

Legal notice is not community engagement.

Michigan law requires public notice and public hearings for certain land use decisions. Some projects treat these legal minimums as their entire engagement strategy. A notice published in a newspaper of record, a sign posted on the property, and a single public hearing do not constitute meaningful engagement, especially for projects that will fundamentally change a place. Real engagement starts months before the formal hearing, involves multiple formats and channels, and is designed to inform and listen, not just comply.

Distrust comes from history, not a lack of communication.

In communities across the Detroit Region, residents have decades of experience with industrial operators that polluted, left, broke promises, or were protected by local government at the expense of neighborhoods. Dismissing project opposition as misinformation or “Not In My Back Yard” (NIMBYism) ignores this history and deepens distrust. Effective engagement starts by acknowledging that history, and demonstrating why and how this project will be different.

The information vacuum is where opposition grows.

When communities do not proactively communicate about a project, residents fill the void with speculation, rumor, and worst-case assumptions. By the time official information is available, the narrative is already set. Communities that control the information timeline, such as sharing facts early, updating regularly, and acknowledging what is still unknown, will reduce the space for misinformation to take hold.

Seek first to understand, then to be understood.

Opposition to major industrial development is a natural response, and it's important not to think of it as a problem to overcome. For most households, their home is their largest financial asset, and any perceived threat to property values triggers legitimate concern. Neighborhoods, blocks, and even vacant or underutilized sites can carry deep emotional significance for the people who live near them.

Leaders who make a genuine effort to understand these concerns before presenting a project's benefits are far more likely to build the trust needed to move through review and approval efficiently. Starting with listening can speed a project up over the long term.



The Recommended Engagement Process



1 Conduct an Initial Exploratory Meeting with Municipal Staff

The developer or end user meets privately with appropriate municipal staff and leadership to determine whether the project is fundamentally aligned with the community's master plan, zoning framework, infrastructure capacity, and economic development goals. At this stage, the goal is not negotiation or approval, it is simply a high-level "warm and fuzzy" discussion to determine whether the project is worth advancing further. These meetings are standard best practice and help avoid wasting time and resources on projects that are clearly not viable.



2 Host an Early Independent Community Open House Before Formal Submission

For very large projects, transformational industrial developments, or projects likely to generate significant public interest, the developer should strongly consider hosting an informal community open house before submitting any official applications. This meeting should occur outside of the formal entitlement process and should be framed as an opportunity to introduce the project concept, listen to concerns, answer questions, and identify issues early while the project is still flexible. Most importantly, this helps demonstrate that the developer is engaging directly with neighbors proactively not simply working behind closed doors with city officials.



3 Refine the Project Based on Feedback

Input gathered from municipal staff and community members should help shape refinements to the project before formal submittals are made. This step is critical because it shows that engagement is meaningful and not simply procedural. Communities are far more receptive when they can see their feedback reflected in the evolving design or operational plan.



4 Enter the Formal Public Approval Process

Only after the exploratory discussions and early outreach occur should the project move into the formal entitlement and public hearing process. At this point, the municipality can clearly communicate that:

- No approvals were granted during exploratory meetings.
- Early engagement was encouraged as a best practice.
- Community feedback was solicited before formal plans were finalized.
- The official public review process is still fully intact and transparent.

This type of structured process creates a healthier environment for everyone involved. Developers receive early feedback and reduce entitlement risk. Municipalities maintain transparency and public trust. Residents feel informed earlier in the process rather than surprised after decisions appear to have already been made. Most importantly, it replaces the perception of "behind closed doors negotiations" with a clearly communicated and repeatable engagement framework.

What Communities and Developers Can Do

Start engagement before the formal process begins.

Hold informal information sessions, neighborhood walks, and small group meetings as early as possible. Use these sessions to listen to concerns, share early information, and establish a relationship with the community.

Designate a community liaison for every major project.

This person's job is to be the accessible, responsive point of contact for residents throughout the project lifecycle, from announcement through construction to ongoing operations. The liaison should be empowered to answer questions, escalate concerns, and provide regular updates.

Communicate in plain language, in multiple formats, in multiple languages. Not everyone reads the newspaper of record. Use social media, direct mail, community bulletin boards, school newsletters, church bulletins, and door-to-door outreach. Translate materials for people who may not speak or read English. Meet people where they are, not where the law says you have to be.

Create structured channels for community input.

Establish a community advisory committee or liaison group that meets regularly throughout the project's lifecycle. Publish meeting minutes, track commitments publicly, and report on whether they are being met. When residents have a consistent seat at the table, public hearings become updates rather than confrontations.

Be honest about what you do not know. Communities and developers lose trust not when they share bad news, but when they're caught withholding it. If environmental studies are pending, say so. If traffic impacts are uncertain, say so. Residents can handle uncertainty, but surprise breeds contempt.

Make community benefits visible and attributable. When a project generates tax revenue that funds a park improvement or a road repair, make that connection explicit. Put up a sign. Issue a press release. Show the community, in concrete terms, what industrial development is contributing to their daily life. Attribution builds support over time.

Key Takeaway

Trust is the foundation that every other element of successful industrial development is built on. Communities and developers that invest in genuine engagement by starting early, communicating honestly, creating accountability, and showing results can transform the dynamic from conflict to partnership. Compared to a more traditional approach of announcing and then defending a project, engagement often provides the most direct path from concept to ribbon cutting.



Reference the engagement tools included in this Toolkit.

- Conducting Exploratory Meetings*
- Facilitating an Effective Open House*
- Conducting a Successful Public Meeting*
- Project Communications, FOIAs, and NDAs*
- Communicating During Construction*