

## ACCESS AND REPRESENTATION

Communities of color, immigrant communities, and low-income communities have been underrepresented in past City civic engagement efforts, which can skew the City’s understanding of the needs of the public. City staff most often describe the challenges of access and representation by referring to neighborhood disparities correlated with historic patterns of institutionalized racism and reinforced by socioeconomic status.

The struggle to consistently have broad representation in decision-making processes and to provide broad access to a variety of services and opportunities may also be compounded by the City’s complex structure.

*“The goal is to foster dialogue and collaboration among many different constituents within the city. However, the same types of people in the same groups continue to be most boisterous. And so we miss out on a lot of voices that could or should be heard.”*

— Chris Bell, Office of Management and Budget

*“[For recruitment efforts] we like to get to areas of underrepresented communities and talk to people and get as many people of color and women aware of the fire service as possible. We spend great effort in that.”*

— Deputy Chief Tory Green, Tacoma Fire Department

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**“We miss out on a lot of voices that could or should be heard.”**

— Chris Bell, Office of Management and Budget

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## Neighborhood Disparities

Staff frequently observed that some neighborhoods are characterized by far more active, demanding, vocal, well connected, and “engaged” residents than others. Specifically, staff refer to the North End, characterized by a high proportion of White, affluent residents known for being vocal and engaged. This is in contrast with other neighborhoods that are perceived to be less engaged, such as the historically Black Hilltop neighborhood and South and East Tacoma. The residents of these

neighborhoods typically have lower household incomes and a higher proportion of immigrant communities than other parts of Tacoma.

*“The Hilltop area, they’re not necessarily clamoring. So we’ll go to their neighborhoods, we go to the neighborhood meetings, we try, and it’s a little bit more of a push. We don’t really have to do anything with the North End, so it’s much easier.”*

— Jim Parvey, Environmental Services:  
Office of Environmental Policy and Sustainability

This is consistent with the data gathered through the 2018 Community Survey, where respondents from Council District 1 (North End, West End) were markedly more satisfied with City services than respondents in Council District 2 (including parts of Old Town, Downtown, and Northeast Tacoma) or Council District 5 (South End). These patterns demonstrate that residents who may already have low trust and satisfaction with the City are less likely to make requests or provide input.

*“We have the same practice no matter where we are. I don’t know how to address it differently. I would love to have that answer, but we really don’t do much different from one area to the other.”*

— Kurtis Kingsolver, Director of Public Works

*“A goal that we have been working on [is] looking at our underserved populations and how often they’re contacting the City. We saw disparity from Council District 5, compared to the rest of the Council districts, and between the White and non-White populations.”*

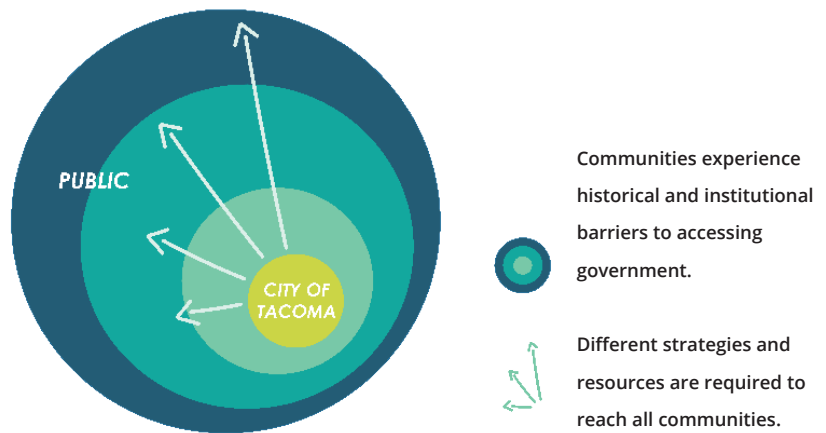
— Allyson Griffith, Neighborhood and Community Services

This suggests that the needs of residents in well-served neighborhoods are generally heard and addressed. The problem, however, is that residents of other neighborhoods do not seek out, and have come to not expect, the same level of responsiveness from the City. It also means that the City’s understanding of the needs of these communities can be skewed by this uneven pattern in engagement.

## **Institutionalized Racism**

Neighborhood disparities can be coded ways of referring to racial and ethnic difference, and the residential segregation that continues to define the city. While Tacoma is not alone in US cities in its history of segregation

## ACCESS & REPRESENTATION



*The historic and institutional barriers faced by low-income and immigrant communities and communities of color can make it more challenging for the City of Tacoma to connect using typical civic engagement methods. Often, connecting with historically marginalized communities requires a more targeted approach to ensure that all voices and experiences are reflected in civic engagement processes.*

and institutionalized racism, the history here is well-documented—for instance, as the Office of Equity and Human Rights outlines, “redlining that occurred in the late 1930s, [resulted in] more than two-thirds of the City having limited or no access to funds for buying or building a home in areas populated by people of color.” In particular, the historically Black Hilltop neighborhood was categorized as the highest risk for investment; this prevented Black residents from acquiring loans to purchase homes and build community wealth.

With increasing growth and rising real estate values, residents with lower incomes, especially Black residents, are being displaced through gentrification. Already from 2010-2015, 35% of African American residents have left the Hilltop, and that displacement is expected to continue with the Tacoma Hilltop Link light rail expansion project. The historical marginalization of Black residents in Tacoma has created an environment of distrust; for instance, only 34% of Black residents voice confidence in City government, as opposed to 60% and 68% of White and Hispanic residents, respectively.

*“[The Black Collective is] a very well-organized group of people who...looked at our data and said, ‘Why is it that in one of the most diverse cities in Washington State, 80% of the workforce is White?’”*

— Diane Powers,  
Director of Office of Equity and Human Rights

This may also be perpetuated by a lack of diversity among City staff: while the White population in Tacoma is roughly 61%, 80% of all City employees are White. Recently, the Office of Equity and Human Rights has acknowledged that the disproportionately White workforce creates barriers for broader representation. The office now works to make changes in hiring practices to incrementally diversify the workforce over time. However, despite ongoing efforts to increase equity and access at the City, our interviews suggest that institutionalized racism persists as an ongoing barrier to participation, informed by long-standing experiences of marginalization.

Given that institutionalized racism is often discussed in the coded language of neighborhood disparities as opposed to overt discussions about racial biases and discriminatory practices, addressing the systemic inequities tied up in race requires targeted and intentional efforts. Some departments already seek to address these disparities through programmatic interventions and deep, relationship-building work.

*“This was a situation where we had an opportunity for public art at the People’s Center. [The steering committee] was concerned about not having any African American artists on the roster, as was I. So we did a workshop for everybody, but really targeted artists of color...now one of the artists is off and running, doing tons of work in the community, and the community felt heard, and [we realized], wow, this actually can happen.”*

— Amy McBride, Community and Economic Development

## **Socioeconomic Status**

In Tacoma, almost 18% of residents are below the federal poverty level. The city’s median annual household income is just over \$51,000—more than \$15,000 less per year than Washington State’s average. As in many cities, opportunities for civic engagement are often most accessible to those with the economic resources and social networks that extend to people in positions of power, such as City staff, leaders, and decision-makers.

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“The people that come to government are the people that have the luxury—they are economically stable, they have the time. Those are the people that we hear and engage. And the people that don’t have that ability are the people whose voices are not being heard.”

— Mike Slevin, Director of Environmental Services

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Departments are working to improve their understandings of and approach to connecting with people who do not have the freedom that comes with discretionary income. The City recognizes that time and energy are two of the most precious resources that people have. This is especially the case for low-income residents who may be working multiple jobs, raising families, and/or caring for elders or disabled family members. These are the people least likely to attend meetings at City Hall. Therefore, it is important that the City extend itself to these residents, who lack the capacity to participate in meetings at City Hall, and innovate new methods to connect with marginalized residents about issues of importance to them.

Economic resources, including stipends and other measures to support participation, would not just be helpful for residents who want to engage with policy matters and other civic topics; they are essential for the City to develop programs and practices that reach more residents, and for the City to communicate with residents more effectively.

### **A Complex Bureaucracy**

Representative government can be difficult to understand and access, and Tacoma’s City Manager governance structure can make this particularly confusing. Meeting times, formats, and procedures for public participation can also be challenging to navigate, even if members of the public are able and willing to attend meetings.

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“Our effectiveness and legitimacy is dependent on us getting broad participation and diverse voices to speak up about how they feel and what they want.”

— Lauren Flemister, Planning and Development Services

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*About 400 residents attended this meeting hosted by the Korean Women's Association to learn about the City's budget process. Cambodian, Vietnamese, Korean, and English translation services were provided to create an atmosphere of inclusion. CITY OF TACOMA*

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“You can't have someone who is making \$300,000 a year being the voice of someone who's making \$40,000 a year.”

— Chris Gleason,  
Tacoma Public Utilities: Public Affairs and Communication

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*"I think average citizens, I think there's a lot of confusion, when you drill down to what any particular department does. For most people, they pretty much just care that when they turn a light switch, their power comes on."*

— Andy Cherullo, Director of Finance Department

For both TPU and the General Government, many staff described service delivery and essential department functions as the primary purpose of their work. With this perspective, many spoke of performing their functions consistently and of trying to present information more clearly rather than working to change the way that the government interacts with residents. (This challenge is outlined more clearly in the following section, Understanding Each Other.)

### **Challenge: A Readiness to Work with Under-Represented Communities**

Without equal access and representation, the City will not be able to ensure the effectiveness of civic engagement efforts. The City aims to gain or lose the most in the eyes of underrepresented communities depending on how they address issues that matter most to these communities. Furthermore, if there is a sense that public engagement is not reflective of a broad and inclusive public, this can jeopardize the legitimacy of the process.

Equitable civic engagement requires that there is organization-wide support for staff to investigate, learn about, and respond to historic and institutional barriers, and engage with culturally sensitive and trauma-informed approaches. Key to success in this arena is identifying priority issues for proactive engagement and creating a readiness within the City to act on input from under-represented communities, even if that input may not seem straightforward or easy to interpret. In this way, the City and staff can attempt to undo those barriers and create new opportunities for trust, dialogue, and co-production.

*"Civic engagement is vast, it is critical and reactionary, and each department has their own way. We're getting better at the proactive piece instead of just reactive. Project PEACE allowed us to gain opportunities from a shared vision, bring the community to us, allowing those communications to develop, and actually meet specific needs, because it's not one-size-fits-all."*

— Captain CP Taylor, Police Department

### Case Study: Strengthening Libraries as an Example of a Learning Community

In May of 2018, 137 urban libraries across the United States, including the Pierce County Library System, signed a statement aimed at achieving racial and social equity. As noted by the Urban Libraries Council (ULC), “Libraries are trusted, venerable and enduring institutions, central to their communities and an essential participant in the movement for racial and social equity.”

Several libraries currently work with ULC to explore ways to reach and engage local entrepreneurs—particularly people of color, women, immigrants, and veterans. For example, St. Louis County Library will, “explore new ways to grow its monthly educational series that engages local entrepreneurs with outreach events, instructional sessions, and a small business and nonprofit expo,” while Kansas City Public Library will, “work to bring multilingual small business and entrepreneurship programs to immigrants and refugees in Kansas City.” More locally, the King County Library System plans to, “develop and implement a holistic and equitable approach to addressing the needs of immigrant and refugee entrepreneurs through research into local economic development plans, sector strategies, and demographics.”

Libraries can be powerful partners in efforts toward racial equity and social change, helping to shift from an ‘informed citizen’ model of service to an ‘engaged, strong-democracy’ model. The latter supports meaningful civic engagement and understanding. This shift also addresses issues like information-overload and misinformation.



Currently, Tacoma Public Libraries is hosting an event series called *Libraries Transform Tacoma*. Each conversation invites the public to come and express their concerns and wishes for their communities. Tacoma Public Libraries plans to take this information and use it to improve the efficacy of its programs and operations. TACOMA PUBLIC LIBRARIES



## UNDERSTANDING EACH OTHER

Many staff perceive a lack of public understanding of the processes and functions of City government. In efforts to be transparent and informative, resources are spent producing and distributing information, or on learning more about public preferences through surveys and other input opportunities.

However, these are both forms of communication that result, primarily, in a one-way flow of dialogue. This often happens in lieu of opportunities for two-way dialogue and conversation, which leads frequently to misunderstandings on both sides.

*“That’s one of our big challenges for the next five years: trying to figure out how we can get people to understand what it is that we do.”*

— Dan Thompson, Environmental Services: Wastewater

*“I think we are getting the information out that we want or need, but I would think that, if we had great civic engagement, the citizens in this community would have a very good understanding of what we do.”*

— Deputy Chief Tory Green, Tacoma Fire Department

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**“That’s one of our big challenges for the next five years: trying to figure out how we can get people to understand what it is that we do.”**

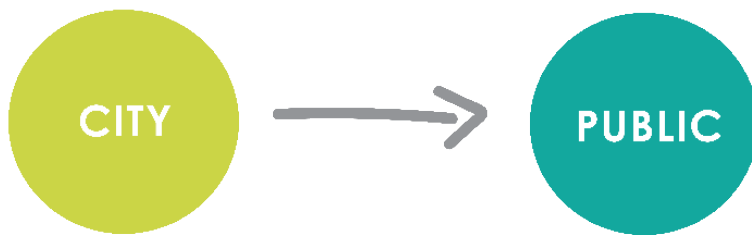
— Dan Thompson, Environmental Services: Wastewater

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## One-Way Communication

As outlined in the section Variation in Practices, tools and methods for communicating with the public are an essential prerequisite for effective civic engagement. Almost all City of Tacoma departments focus on communicating with the public, employing methods such as press releases, social media, educational videos, and promotions. These are all good examples of messaging aimed at increasing understanding on the

## ONE-WAY COMMUNICATION



*The City pushes out information to promote public understanding of departmental work.*



*The public provides information to inform City services, policies, and practices.*

part of the public. However, while public understanding of City programs and services is important, sole reliance on these one-way methods of communication limits opportunity for responses and dialogue.

Resources are also invested in surveys, polling, and comment periods in an effort to understand resident perspectives, but this is also primarily a one-way flow of communication. Even though the type of information gathered from residents can be incredibly valuable, it is often not enough, especially since underrepresented groups tend to also be underrepresented in survey design and access to comment periods. As a result, staff and residents are more likely to talk past each other, especially in the context of underrepresented communities, causing an incomplete feedback loop.

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“We’ve gone to a permitting system that has a lot more transparency, and through that system, we’ve been able to push out a lot of information.”

— Jana Magoon, Planning and Development Services

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*“[Market research methods] can bring that voice of the customer into the organization, with data, to help inform operational decision-making surrounding capital projects or changes in policies and procedures.”*

— Dan Drennan,  
Tacoma Public Utilities: Public Affairs and Communication

### **Two-Way Communication**

Staff highlighted the need to better understand the experiences and desires of diverse community members, specifically through programs and effective two-way communication. While brief exchanges of two-way communication can provide key points of clarity, ongoing exchanges over time—such as the creation of sustained programs—have the potential to build mutual understanding, productive relationships, and can also inspire the co-production of programs and policies (Appendix F: Civic Engagement Approaches outlines this in more detail).

As the City furthers its work to align hiring practices with the diversity of Tacoma’s population (discussed in Access & Representation), it will bring new members of the public into dialogue with representatives from the City of Tacoma (see figure to the right, Two-Way Communication).

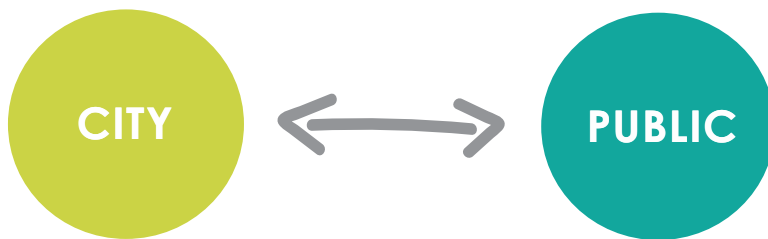
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“Let [residents] provide you with feedback. And not just feedback, but an avenue to engage in a conversation.”

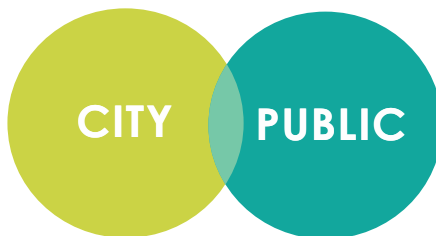
— Danielle Larson, Finance Department

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## TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION



***The public and the City have opportunities to learn from each other, and the public knows how their input is used in decision-making.***



***Opportunities for open dialogue and improvements in hiring practices bring the City and the public into more frequent and sustained contact.***

### Language Access

Language access is a critical factor in promoting mutual understanding between the City and residents—especially because 19% of residents speak a language other than English at home (Census ACS 2016). In our interviews, it became clear that the strategies for engaging populations with limited English varies significantly across departments. Some departments have implemented proactive approaches in their hiring of multilingual staff, while others rely on translation services and technology to increase access and understanding.

However, overall this is an area that would benefit from increased attention as part of an organization-wide initiative for civic engagement. In particular, departments would benefit from a better understanding

of best practices and of available resources for things like translation services or governance models, such as the Commission on Immigrant and Refugee Affairs.

*“We will still have some business owners for whom English is a second language. We have interpreter services, and we actually have quite a few people on our staff right now who can speak a second language, so that’s helpful.”*

— Danielle Larson, Finance Department

*“As we started to plan the town halls, [we heard from the Spanish speaking community] they were tired of always having to have the headphones on and listen to translation—they wanted to do the town halls in Spanish, with all the non-Spanish speakers having the earphones for translation, so that’s what happened.”*

— Diane Powers,  
Director of Office of Equity and Human Rights

## **Challenge: Creating Opportunities for Two-Way Communication**

One-way communication leads to misunderstandings between the City and the public, which often results in low or uneven participation from residents and frustration among staff. In some cases, it leads to high levels of concern among residents, creating flashpoints (discussed in more detail in the following section).

The City has succeeded in creating occasions for two-way communication in specific programs and contexts, and an opportunity looms to make this more widespread across departments. However, programmatic opportunities for two-way dialogue can be time and cost intensive, and managing and utilizing the qualitative data received from two-way communication can be challenging. However, the iterative process of summarizing and sharing this information back to the community—and ensuring that they understand how their input was or will be used—is an essential part of building trust as part of two-way communication.

*“Ultimately, it’s up to people to define what they want their community to be, and if we don’t have a great mechanism to understand how people feel, then I don’t think we’re as successful as we could and should be.”*

— Lauren Flemister, Planning and Development Services

### Case Study: Lincoln District Revitalization Project

Tacoma City Council initiated the Lincoln District Revitalization Project in 2014 and structured it around the seven Tacoma 2025 priority areas: Health and Safety, Human and Social Needs, Economic Vibrancy and Employment, Education and Learning, Arts and Cultural Vitality, Natural and Built Environment, and Government Performance.

In an innovative effort to practice the values of accountability and partnership, this project involved the Community and Economic Development Department, in partnership with other departments, establishing a satellite office in the Lincoln District. The City positioned this office strategically, to be accessible to the community throughout the revitalization process; and staffed it with local language needs in mind, allowing residents easier access to the City for input, questions, and concerns. An intentional effort was made to include members of the community in the planning process for the neighborhood's revitalization. The City continues this commitment to the residents through the satellite office. The inclusive project enabled staff to build relationships, engage in dialogue, and meet residents where they live, work, play, and gather.



Students examined the Lincoln District Revitalization Project as a case study. (The Lincoln District is shown above in a manipulated digital image.) DON CAMP

## FLASHPOINTS AND CATALYSTS

Flashpoints, or high levels of participation that are passionate or urgent in nature, often emerge surrounding controversial issues. This may cause the City to invest considerable energy on specific decisions and actions, and sometimes comes at the expense of more sustained relationship-building work or policy change.

While responding to public frustration can be time-consuming, for staff, flashpoints are important indicators of community needs. In addition, these moments serve as important catalysts for the development of programmatic interventions to solve underlying communications or policy challenges. Flashpoints also spur dialogue, which provides opportunities for more meaningful engagement.

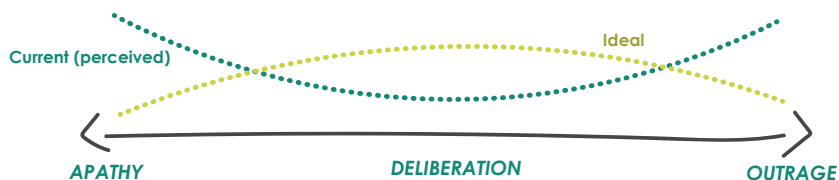
### Flashpoints

*“Activists may or may not totally represent the whole community. Twenty people will come every week and they’re the same people. Is that really what the community is saying?”*

— Tad Wille, Assistant City Manager

When high levels of public attention and participation emerge around policy changes, staff must often combine civic engagement with crisis management techniques. As issues become more controversial, additional

## FLASHPOINTS & CATALYSTS



*This schematic illustrates what we heard from many staff: that, on a spectrum from “apathy” to “outrage,” public responses to City policies tend to be clustered on either end of the spectrum (turquoise line). However, the goal of a deliberative approach would be to create more opportunities for public input, increase responsiveness, and minimize levels of outrage (green line).*

resources are often committed to these efforts. Furthermore, while flashpoints may elevate new and important topics on the public agenda, they do not always indicate broad public opinion. For this reason, it is challenging to interpret and use this input to direct policy and social change.

Many staff lamented the general challenge of getting people to show up to participate. This is particularly true about the daily, on-going work of the City. Often, the perception is that the public doesn't care, or that the issue's impact on the public is low. Yet, on the other end of the spectrum, certain decisions catch public attention and ignite broad dissatisfaction, leaving staff to continually respond to complaints or crisis. One interviewee called this, "the range from apathy to outrage." This captures a sentiment that we heard across several departments: it can often be challenging to find a place along this spectrum where residents can participate meaningfully in the policy-making process. Instead, it often appears to City staff that the public either does not see the benefit of showing up, or they are too opposed to a project or outraged about a policy to believe that engaging in the process is worthwhile.

While the spectrum is a helpful way to understand generalized patterns of the public's sentiment toward the City, flashpoints also serve as indications of miscommunication, lack of transparency, and legitimate community frustration around a policy issue. They also emerge out of the mistrust that stems from community experiences of historical disinvestment, trauma, and institutionalized racism. Therefore, when the public does not show up, it may not be due to a lack of interest but instead due to a lack of understanding of the process, knowledge of how to participate, low level of trust in City government, or belief that one's input will not make a difference. In addition, while it can be tempting to think of flashpoints as merely a lack of understanding, creating solutions to these problems often goes beyond increased, one-way communication, and requires more robust dialogue (as discussed in the previous section, Understanding Each Other).

*"It can be tricky when you get into emotionally charged topics, and typically as a City employee you have to try and be as professional as possible and make fact-based decisions rather than emotional ones."*

— Dan Drennan, Tacoma Public Utilities:  
Public Affairs and Communication



## **Response to Flashpoints**

Either in anticipation or in response to public pushback that emerges around these issues, General Government and TPU staff often invest considerable energy in sharing information (as discussed in the previous finding) to educate the public, sometimes also working to create new forums for discussion. Though these are important moments to engage with the public, they also require significant organizational resources. In controversial cases, staff time and budgets can be stretched in order to accommodate public input.

## **Risk of Being Responsive to Flashpoints**

These flashpoints can be particularly challenging for staff when the process is legally mandated or required by policy, with minimal leeway. Without the public fully understanding the process, as described in the previous finding, it can also be particularly challenging to carry out these discussions. Several interviewees noted that this increased participation takes place when members of the public perceive that their interests are under attack. The concern that individual interests drive the process is compounded over fears that it is often a very small slice of the public who shows up and participates. As discussed in detail in Access & Representation, unevenness of access to the City has implications for the organization's broader engagement, and the sense that flashpoint issues dominate civic engagement makes it more challenging to use input gathered in these settings.

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**“Just because we may outline that we’re going to have three or four public meetings doesn’t mean we don’t end up having more. It might be controversial, so we just have to find ways to absorb that into the budget.**

— Kurtis Kingsolver, Director of Public Works

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*“We don’t have huge crowds the majority of the time, but every now and then we will have hearings where the room gets a lot fuller. It just depends on how many people are being affected, and how controversial the issues are.”*

— Jeff Capell, Hearing Examiner

## **Flashpoints Catalyze: Opportunities for More Meaningful Engagement**

While high levels of participation surrounding these controversial issues or policy changes can be resource-intensive and draining for staff, in some cases they prove their merit, as catalysts for new or changed opportunities for more in-depth and productive engagement with the public. For example, in one interview, staff described the budget shortfall that Tacoma faced during the last recession, which led to significant decreases in funding across City departments and services. In anticipation of this issue, former City Manager T.C. Broadnax held budget meetings throughout the City to explain the situation and prioritize funding. According to City staff, these meetings “had huge participation” even though they were not required; several staff credited the meetings for improving public understanding through several years of financially dire straits.

In addition, much of the literature on civic engagement and collaborative governance highlights the inevitability of conflict and disagreement in these kinds of “shared-power settings.” Instead of indicating systemic dysfunction, some scholars note that it is these controversial policy issues that cause a political community to form, which can itself become an important part of the policy-making process.

## **Challenge: Respond Proactively and Avoid Reliance on Flashpoints**

Conflicts arise commonly at the municipal level and can be important gauges for understanding where to focus increased attention or resourcing. However, given the often unequal access to the City, flashpoint issues do not always reflect the broad opinions and needs of the entire community. For this reason, using these as the sole catalysts to guide decision-making skews the City’s understanding of the issues most important to the public.

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“Instead of backing away from crises, we want to be more aggressive about seeing how we can address those needs without tying up unnecessary or inappropriate resources.”

— Chief Jim Duggan, Tacoma Fire Department

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**Case Study: Project PEACE**

The Tacoma Police Department (TPD) and the Office of Equity and Human Rights launched Project PEACE (Partnering for Equity And Community Engagement) in 2015. Against the backdrop of widespread protests over the police shooting of Michael Brown and other unarmed Black men around the country, the project hosted a series of community conversations among communities of color and TPD.

By acknowledging a potential flashpoint, the project took a deep dive toward trying to understand the root causes of community concerns. In a series of listening sessions that lasted between three and four hours each, small group facilitators encouraged police officers to engage in dialogue with community members about institutionalized racism, their own personal perceptions and experiences with TPD, and opportunities for the department to be more responsive to resident needs.

In addition to fostering relationships between TPD and historically marginalized communities, TPD intentionally integrated the outcome of the series of conversations into its development of a strategic plan. The process produced six key pillars for work going forward: building trust and legitimacy, improving policy and oversight, social media, community policing and crime reduction, enhance training and education, and officer wellness and safety.



*Tacoma Police Headquarters. The City of Tacoma started Project PEACE in 2015. The project has created space for the Tacoma Police Department and community members to come together to identify and address public safety concerns. DIAMOND BROOKE*