Conference Rewind July 2024

Rules of Effective Community Engagement in Urban Forestry – Dr. Asia Dowtin

Katie Branch: [00:00:12] Hello and welcome to the ISA Conference Rewind video series. I'm Katie Branch, Component Specialist with the International Society of Arboriculture. Today, ISA is proud to bring you a presentation by Asia Dowtin on the rules of effective community engagement in urban forestry. This presentation was originally given at the 2022 ISA Virtual Conference, and the views seen here are those of the presenter. If you are interested in recent impacts on how we approach community engagement and best practices for engaging communities in both direct and indirect forms, I hope you'll find this presentation exciting and insightful. Enjoy.

Asia Dowtin: Hi, everyone. My name is Asia Dowtin, and I am grateful for the opportunity to speak with you today about the rules of effective community engagement and urban forestry. [00:01:00] Throughout this presentation, I'll provide an overview of what have been some of the recent impacts on how we approach effective community engagement in urban forestry. We'll also review some of the best practices that have been identified in our field to engage communities both directly and through some indirect forms. We will explore some lessons learned from some model examples in the US, and then a program that is internationally managed. Then we'll close out with some concluding thoughts. Throughout the presentation, you may notice that I like to ask questions of the audience, so I'll throw some questions your way to kind of engage thought. Please don't hesitate to take some time to think through the questions. I'll always pause after I ask them, and then we'll kind of regroup after a few seconds to think through your answers and my answers and how they tie back into our conversation today. So, without further ado, let's jump right in.

[00:02:00] Actually, we're going to start with a question. When you hear the term "community engagement," what comes to mind for you? I always like to say there is no right or wrong answer, but it's just your interpretation of the term "community engagement." What do you think of when you hear it? So, there are several ways that folks interpret the term "community engagement" in the field of forestry, and then by default, this extends into urban forestry and arboriculture. When we talk about community engagement, often times we're talking about the process wherein individuals, communities, and stakeholder groups can exchange information, articulate interest, and have the potential to influence decisions or the outcome of forest management issues. This is a great definition. I think it sums things up very nicely, but we have a lot of time to chat about this today. [00:03:00] So, we're going to just kind of break this down and see what it really looks like when played out in the real world. But before we dive into any type of examples and their rules for this effective community engagement, I will take a couple minutes to just reflect on some things, some of which are going to seem slightly randomly thrown into this list, but I promise you they'll all tie together in the end.

Some brief reflections which are going to involve a few more questions from me to you. First and foremost, honestly, when it comes to thinking about where you want to live or where you do live or aspirations for the future, what's your preference in terms of city life, suburban life, or rural life? Alright, got an idea of that in your mind? So if you do, I have another question for you, and that is, to date, which, if any of these, [00:04:00] have been your favorite social media site or sites to engage with between Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or now X, Myspace for those of us who go way back with social

media, TikTok, Snapchat, Threads, something else that I may have missed along the way? Do you have a favorite site? Have those favorites shifted since you've engaged with social media or have chosen not to engage at all? Again, no right or wrong answers, just the time for reflection. Okay, our next question, on a scale from 1 to 10, how would you rate your personal interest in issues related to climate change with 10 being the highest? So, the truth of the matter is we can think about these questions and our responses to these questions on an individual level, which I think is overall a healthy practice just to see how we're relating to these big patterns and societal trends. [00:05:00] But beyond us and ourselves on a personal level, these are questions that I think everyone in our society can sit and ask themselves and reflect on, and you'd probably get an array of different answers if you ask folks within your respective spheres of influence. Reality is the truth of the matter is for all those questions that we went through, there are legitimate trends that we're observing that ultimately impact the field of arboriculture, the field of urban forestry, and how we engage the community within both of them.

So, along the lines of those questions we went through, reality says residential preferences are shifting and that people are trending—populations have you know over the past three decades—have been trending towards a more urban setting. So, we've seen in the United States and we've seen abroad that the proportion of people who lives in cities has now exceeded 50 percent. In many communities, this is growing at a rapid rate. [00:06:00] In terms of that social media question—What's your favorite?—reality tells us that pathways for social engagement, connectedness, and cohesion have evolved rapidly over the past two decades, and they continue to do so at a fast pace. A lot of that can be attributed to the emergence and legitimate buy in to these social media spaces that have allowed people to stay connected with one another. We've seen that evolve and turn into ways that people are now connected to news—the gathering of information, whether it's on hot topics in the news, but often times even hot topics in their communities of expertise. A lot of times, we see people staying connected to advances in arboriculture researching practices. Same with urban forestry by way of social media. So, it's played a huge role in connecting people to each other and to information.

In terms of climate change, that particular question, we've seen that in recent years public understanding of and interest in environmental issues, [00:07:00] which include those related to climate, urban quality of life, urban ecosystem science and services, and equity has deepened drastically in recent years. When we sum all of these things together, the truth of the matter is all of these trends, all of these patterns impact how we engage with the public, how we should think about engaging with the public, and in reverse, how the public thinks about and wants to engage with us, as professionals in arboriculture and urban forestry, but just as importantly, how the public was to engage with the trees that really form the center of our profession and often times our life work.

As we think about the rules for effective community engagement, the reality is we got to realize at the foundation are these societal forces and patterns that really shape the way people want to be engaged with [00:08:00] and what's on people's minds as they engage with green spaces around them. We have a responsibility to understand those things that we can engage with the public effectively, because ultimately it does impact how we take care of the trees in the communities in which we live, work, and play, and how we can encourage the communities that we live, work, and play in to invest in those trees as well.

So, packaging all this together, let's go through kind of in a little bit more of a concrete way, the factors that are impacting the current shifts and community engagement specifically in urban forestry and arboriculture. Along the lines of what we just chatted about, there's that global shift towards a more urban population. There's also this growing awareness of observed and potential risk of climate change.

I think one thing that we can attribute to the COVID-19 pandemic and the way that we thought about just green spaces in general since then is that [00:09:00] there's this increase, awareness of, and importance being placed on sustaining and improving public health and well-being, specifically through urban green spaces. There's been a plethora of research studies that have come out on this. There's been a plethora of popular press articles that have come out on this, and there's been just an emergence of public interest in linking green space to public health and understanding whether or not those green spaces are distributed equitably.

We can also say that advances in technology, including smart tools and social media, have played a significant role in educating the public about urban green spaces and impact in the ways in which the public may want to engage with those spaces, whether again, it's through tweeting about them with some of the groups that they may follow or scholars they follow or community activists they may follow, or maybe getting out there and collecting their own data. [00:10:00] Maybe not through a citizen science program, but by way of drones, by way of imagery that they may take with their own smartphones could even be playing around with street view on Google Maps and learning about their community and their community tree cover in that respect.

Something that's been really huge here in the United States that may serve as a model to other nations around the world is this federal investment in urban forestry programming. We had the recent investment of about 1.5 billion dollars that's gone into urban and community forestry in the United States this year (2023). The ways in which that funding was allocated, there was a huge emphasis on making sure that community engagement was prioritized in the projects that received support with specific emphasis on ensuring that communities that have historically been underserved and under resourced received a significant amount of engagement and equitable engagement throughout the time of the grant funding period.

[00:11:00] So, we're seeing collectively with all these shifts, these are really becoming the factors of this current moment, the impact of this current moment that are shifting and really actually shaping the way that we should be thinking about community engagement, and in reverse, the ways in which communities want to engage with us as arborist and urban foresters. With these things in mind, I think it's important for us to ask ourselves, How do we successfully engage the community and urban forestry efforts that we may be leading or being a part of or may even want to help start up? This is a question that really opens the door for a lot of other questions including like what does this effective engagement actually look like? What should it involve in terms of activities and resources? And we probably should go beyond the what of it all and asked who should it involve? [00:12:00] Who should be in this at the table? Who should be in the field with us? And at what scale should we really be pursuing this effective community engagement? Is there a right answer for this question? Does it depend on the project or projects you may be working on? These are the questions that we're going to kind of try to find answers to as we walk through the rest of our time together.

Let's transition now from thinking about the impacts to thinking about the implementation of community engagement. We'll shift and we'll talk about some of the rules for effective community engagement. Over the next few slides, what you'll notice is the heading of the slides and then the content that follows, but the heading will kind of outline what some of the rules are that I've been thinking through, and I'll share that these are rules that have come from either my engagement with the literature or my time in the field, but this is not necessarily an exhaustive list. As we go through everything today, [00:13:00] if there are strategies, best practices that you may have learned or experienced your time in the field, or even observed, if they're not on the list, I would encourage you to

add them to your own list and maybe even write back with feedback around what you've also found to be effective.

With that, Rule #1. When we think about effective community engagement in urban forestry, bi-directional communication is key. What do we mean when we talk about bi-directional communication? We're talking about communication between those who may hold formal legislative authority in the realm of urban forestry (AKA those in government), whether its policy makers or urban forest managers within a specific jurisdiction, and the stakeholders who may be the recipients, the beneficiaries if you will, of the decisions that those in the government positions may hold. [00:14:00] It's very tempting, sometimes when you live in a system that may follow more of a hierarchical model to work on the opposite of this—that is this one direction of communication where folks at the top communicate decisions, ideas, information to those who may not necessarily be at the top. And that's it. It's just like this one-way flow of knowledge, information, ideas, and decisions. Not fair at all. Not equitable, and it's really not sustainable if you want the community to be engaged in your process.

What is sustainable though is making sure that it's more of a circular exchange of knowledge, information, and ideas. So, in as much as those who hold decision-making powers have a right and spaces to share information, knowledge, their voices, stake holders at all levels need to have that same access to space, if you will, to share their information, their ideas, their knowledge, their concerns, their best practices. [00:15:00] In that sharing, in that neutral sharing, there has to be a space for again the platform for ideas to be shared, but also the openness to receive ideas to process them together and whatnot. I will talk to that in just a bit.

All right Rule #2. It's very important to understand their varied community engagement strategies. So, what does that mean? I'm happy you asked. We'll come through and talk about what all of these strategies or what a decent amount of these strategies look like. When we think about different strategies that we can use to communicate and engage with the community stakeholders, I like to think of things and sometimes the literature will put things into these distinct buckets. The buckets include indirect techniques and direct techniques. We'll talk about these indirect techniques first.

When we talk about indirect techniques of community engagement, [00:16:00] often we're looking at gathering information from community members through actions that do not necessarily require actual contact with stakeholders. Often this is characterized by like the absence of face-to-face engagement. We're not talking about our community group meetings. We're not talking about going door to door and talking with people or showing up as schools or faith-based organizations. Instead, we're looking more at conducting surveys, providing comment sheets through which the public can provide their commentary on a decision or proposed action. Then this may look like toll-free phonelines that the public can use to call up, leave a message, and hope that someone on the other end hears that message and takes what they've shared into consideration.

[00:17:00] These indirect messages, like everything else that we encounter in our field, have their set of advantages and come with some disadvantages. In terms of the advantages with these indirect techniques, they really like when we survey the community, when we allow for the folks to just contribute information sort of indirectly. We can actually put ourselves in a position to get a broad scope of what the public opinion is, and that could be helpful to get a just a high-level understanding of what the public may be feeling regarding things that may be proposed regarding our urban forest management. You know, there are times when sometimes you do want to be able to run some form of statistical analysis. This is really good in those communities where maybe collecting, managing,

analyzing data, analyzing trends over time can be really helpful. This form of communication or engagement can facilitate [00:18:00] that type of data analysis for you. Again, this provides you with this broad scope view of what the public is thinking or feeling regarding the ways in which urban trees are taking care of and or manage.

Disadvantages though include the fact that when you're serving the public maybe when there's this sort of indirect form of engagement, you're missing out on the dynamics of communication that really allow for you to go in depth with how individuals or members of the community may be feeling, and it does kind of cut off that bi-directional communication, which we'll get into in just a second. Now, again sticking with this rule of understanding the varied community engagement strategies, we talked about that indirect techniques bucket. The other bucket for community engagement strategies is sort of filled with all the options that we have for direct techniques. [00:19:00] Direct techniques referring to direct opportunities to engage with the public, one-on-one, directly, that human-to-human interaction.

When we talk about direct techniques, we're talking about the gathering of information from community members through actions that do require actual contact with stake holders. Like I shared just briefly a moment ago, this does include face-to-face engagement. It can take on various forms. You may see this in the form of focus groups, advisory councils, committee meetings, citizen juries. Again, this may be members of an urban forestry team in engaging with stakeholders at schools or community groups or at faith-based organizations. There is a plethora of advantages that come from the application of these direct engagement techniques. [00:20:00] They include, you know, in some measures or by some opinions better learning opportunities, so better opportunities for you to learn the dynamic interest concerns, maybe even history of the ways that the public has engaged with their urban green spaces or perceived their urban green spaces. These direct techniques also allow for a greater engagement with diverse stakeholder groups.

So again, you can work with those who are with the utility, the local utility. You can work with those who are with the local interest groups, special interest groups. This particular form or strategy, these direct techniques also really do facilitate that bi-directional communication, which again is a goal as much as is possible. One of the challenges with these direct techniques is it can be sometimes a little bit more challenging to obtain those representative samples that are a little bit more easily delivered through those indirect techniques.

[00:21:00] So, let's look at a few ways that you may be able to engage the public based on these different strategies. You may see, for example, like an information exchange or directive participation through those one-directional techniques. Again, not necessarily always the most ideal, but let's say you need to get information now by way of a flyer. You may be able to do it this way. This would fall into that indirect technique. Consultation. This may be seeking feedback from the community. This could be bi-directional, and it could come in the form of again asking for surveys or going to community group meetings where as a leader in the field you're able to share some of the high-level decisions that may be under consideration. At the same time, you're giving members of the community's space, [00:22:00] time, the stage, if you will, to voice their concerns, to voice their feedback.

There are also collaborative techniques that can be applied in this. This might look like in terms of engaging the community is not necessarily making a decision around what's going to happen with your urban forest, and then just giving the community an opportunity to respond. Instead, this looks like working with members of the community to make a decision around, you know, an urban forest management technique that's going to be a mutual benefit to the municipal goals, the goals of whatever

entity may be managing the land, but also whatever the goals and interests are of the stakeholders that are going to be impacted by that decision both in the short and the long term. Similarly related, there is the technique that can be applied that really looks like co-management of your urban forest. [00:23:00] Co-management and development of strategies around your urban forest management plans and the like.

So, what this may look like is somewhat of a shared leadership and program implementation and assessment. Working together to determine, again, what are going to be the objectives of this urban forest management strategy that we're developing together? What are going to be the techniques that we use collectively to help meet these goals? And how can we work together to collect the information, to collect the data that is needed to make sure that we're making the progress towards the goals and objectives that we've laid out? Again, as you think through what effective community engagement looks like, it's super important to understand all the options that are available to you in terms of, you know, what may work best.

If you need to get that broad scope view of what the public is thinking, maybe you're using those indirect techniques. If you want to get in and understand neighborhood by neighborhood or [00:24:00] stakeholder group by stakeholder group, what's important, how might we be able to work together? What are some of the goals that we might want to outline and work together to achieve? Then some of those direct techniques may be more along the lines of what you may want to implement. Or collectively as someone who may be a leader in this space in your organization or in your community or at a regional scale, what's going to be important is again to know the tools that are available to you and to apply them based on what works best for whatever the goals are that your work was at that time and the groups that you know are going to be within your sphere of influence. So, these are sort of lessons taken from the literature which are important, but I also think it's really important to take lessons from folks that are doing the work on the ground, whether it's at the municipal scale or larger.

This leads to that third key role of effective community engagement. Again, in my book—you may have others in your book, [00:25:00] but that is it's really important to learn from, adopt, and adapt best practices from successful models. These are successful models that may be present within your community, your county, your state, and then others that may be available to us at a national level, international level. So, I thought that what might be cool for the rest of our time together today might be look at a couple of examples that I think were really great models of how to engage the community both at the municipal level and then when you're working with folks at a multinational level. We're going to look at the Philly Tree Plan, which is a star model for effective community engagement in my club, and then the SFI Urban and Community Forest Sustainability Standard. I think the process by which SFI worked to develop that standard provides a strong model for community engagement at a larger multinational scale. I will share that [00:26:00] for each of these plans or for each of these models, I would highly encourage you if either or both of them are of interest you, a lot of information is publicly accessible online, and so I would encourage you to dig into both of those as you wish. A lot of what I did to gather some of the background information for this.

So, talking about the Philly Tree Plan for the next few minutes. With this plan, the people of Philadelphia worked together to really put together a 10-year urban forest management plan that grew out of some larger-scale municipal initiatives to work towards urban sustainability goals for the city of Philadelphia. They worked internally with staffers that they had who worked specifically in urban forestry in the city as well as with an external consulting firm to help, you know, move this process along. Consulting with that external firm, they were in a position to increase their capacity for really setting out the [00:27:00]

goals for writing this plan and making sure it was done to the best level possible. They, throughout the process, encouraged and supported attendance at community group meetings. That's where a lot of their efforts really started. So, really working to attend those meetings and listen to what the heartbeat was of the community before moving forward with any other plans to move the 10-year plan forward. Their plan, once it was off the ground, included a social media campaign, a signage blitz that was done in multiple languages. They worked with surveys, and they did online educational outreach initiatives. You can see in the ways in which they move forward with planning out how to do this plan correctly, thinking through their community engagement techniques, they used a mix of some of those indirect and direct techniques that we talked about earlier.

[00:28:00] Looking at their plan again, this information is publicly accessible, but one thing that I wanted to note is that throughout their plan writing process, there was a process. A process that wasn't a night and day. It wasn't, "Oh, all right, we're going to set this plan. We're going to accomplish this in a six-month period." No, this plan took multiple years. As you can see here, there was a goal to do work in 2020, which was obviously sidetracked by some of the work... The way, I should say, that the COVID pandemic impacted a lot of our plans for 2020. But the city, their team continued to move forward and actually put together something that was, in my opinion, just phenomenally done.

So, I'll share just some lessons from that plan that I reviewed and that I think are really just key lessons for us to learn as we think about [00:29:00] how to implement community engagement in our respective spheres of influence. Like I mentioned earlier, the city really prioritized getting out into the community, learning what the heartbeat of the community was, and in creating spaces for that bi-directional communication, allowing for city leadership to share with the overall vision was for this plan, but also allowing for community residents who live, work, and play and the various neighborhoods of Philadelphia to share about their history with the trees in the city, to share about the ways that they wanted to see trees distributed, planted, cared for over the next 10 years. The city team went forward and really identified who were leaders in the city of Philadelphia who already had a strong sense of place in the community, of a respectable level of rapport within their own neighborhoods in the city, and thought through ways that they could [00:30:00] engage those folds in engaging the larger city.

They created spaces for those people who are already leaders in the community to then join in the effort to develop this 10-year plan. In addition to that, they created multiple ways to engage with folks across the city again. This is to an extent during the height of the pandemic. So, they created virtual open houses and an engagement hub that allowed for community members to kind of log on or log in and learn more about the process when they couldn't necessarily move about and attend meetings as freely as we could outside of the pandemic. Over the course of their planning process or their plan development process, they created a series of workshops that stake holders could attend to learn more about the plan, its trajectory, to provide background knowledge on urban forestry. They worked with various organizations across the city to lead and then populate these workshops.

[00:31:00] One of the things that I genuinely respect about this program, and I'm noticing now that a lot of other cities across the country are utilizing a very similar model, is that the city of Philadelphia thought through how can we best engage the full city? How can we make sure that voices from across the community are listen to, respected, and brought to the table as his plan is developed? They went in the direction of creating a neighborhood ambassador program where, again, they identified who the leaders were in the city, across the city who had those strong ties to neighborhoods across the city, and provided those people with paid positions to help sort of serve as the liaison between the city team that was leading the development of this urban forest management plan and the communities that

ultimately are going to be impacted by it. So, they created this liaison program through which folks who had rapport with the city and with the neighborhoods could serve [00:32:00] as that go between and provide those folks with compensation to do that.

Additionally, the city had an incentive to again get that broad-level, that high-level view of what attitudes, engagements, perceptions of urban forests were from community members across the city. So, they launched a citywide survey—again indirect technique, but still valuable, especially when you want to do some form of statistical analysis. They launched a citywide survey. They made it available in eight different languages, and they had more than 7,000 responses across the city with folks from communities that they identified as having a higher need for trees and then also those communities that maybe had a medium need for trees and then were low priority for planting initiatives, which is again just extremely commendable. They also utilize social media to engage the public with the process. [00:33:00] They launched a #PhillyTreeStories photo challenge and gave the members of the city residents across the city the opportunity to engage with this social media campaign where they could document their stories that related to their engagement with trees across the city of Philadelphia.

Again, I really encourage you to look into this report if you have the time to do so, because they did a phenomenal Load job of summarizing what some of their engagement takeaways were. I think that these are lessons that can be again learned from, adopted, and potentially adapted in the communities in which you may work in urban forestry or arboriculture. So, some key lessons—and again, this is all credited to the Philly team—but number one is that residents recognize the values of trees. They learn that when trees are not protected, communities do feel the loss. The trees in some people's eyes can be a burden to homeowners, outweighing the benefits. [00:34:00] These are again, not necessarily things— that's a lesson that may not make us feel good, but it allows us the opportunity to really understand what community members who were surveyed and responded what they feel, and understanding again the heartbeat of the community and allowing the community to know that I heard you. I heard when you shared that concern. It's a key tool, a key technique for making sure that you are able to establish that strong connection with the community. That strong connection allows for trust to be established, and from that trust being established, we're in a position to now be effective and thinking through how we can work together to advance the needs of the community while advancing the needs for the care and management of our urban trees, and doing so in a way that advances in step with what the community priorities, needs, and concerns may be.

So, just to quickly backtrack both from what we've seen in Philly [00:35:00] and what we've talked about initially in terms of these different rules of engagement and these techniques, you can know the techniques, you can know the rules, but it's also really important to know the why. The why of it all is that when we think about effective community engagement, it shouldn't just be something that we have on our checklist of things to do to say we did this and now we've moved forward with whatever. It's important because remember ultimately one of the things, the key thing, that separates urban forestry from traditional forestry is that we're dealing with forests where the people are in high concentration. Ultimately, at the center of that is people, and we want to make sure that we are respecting and making space for the people and prioritizing them, because ultimately, they're going to be the ones who help us steward these resources that we're responsible for managing. So, we want to make sure that we build that trust, and that really boils down to making space for folks to feel heard and, beyond making that space, [00:36:00] actually listening to them and after listening thinking through how we can work together to get on the same page regarding what the community wants and needs are and what the wants and needs are for urban forest management initiatives. So, those are some of the key lessons learned from Philly. We're going to switch gears now and go to SFI.

SFI stands for Sustainable Forestry Initiative. Over the past few years SFI has led the charge in developing an urban and community forestry standard. Apologies for not spelling out SFI or UCF here, but here again, Motivation for the SFI UCF Standard for the Sustainable Forestry Initiative Urban and Community Forestry Standard. So, SFI was motivated to do this for several reasons, some of which tie back to the beginning of our conversation, but as an organization, they really wanted to incentivize climate smart management of urban forest. They had interest in standardizing our knowledge base and strategies for sustainable management of urban forest, [00:37:00] and they wanted to develop an audited recognition program that acknowledges organizational commitment to sustainable urban forest management.

So, let's talk through how we went from motivation behind creating the standard to actually developing and implementing this. You remember with Philly we looked at like that tail end of the timeline that one slide where we saw 2019 and 2020. The key takeaway there is that like their process took time. That's also another key takeaway here with SFI. Their process took time as well. So with SFI, you'll see that in 2020 the initial work was done for moving this all forward, and it started with a public survey. So again, what kind of technique is that? You got it. It's an indirect technique. That public survey really allowed for an assessment of interest in creating a standard and a certification for urban forest. They distributed this survey both in United States and Canada [00:38:00] and got about 600 respondents from the two countries, and overall learned—again that broad scope view—they learned that there was general support for the standard. So, that gave them the green light to move forward with developing a standard.

In moving that forward in 2021, SFI partnered with a host of organizations with similar interests including ISA, Society of Municipal Arborists, which has a recent name change, the Arbor Day Foundation, American Forests, and Tree Canada to begin the process of standard development. I want to note the different partners that came to the table because ultimately it kind of helps us to think about what community engagement looks like at a different scale, right? This is a multinational objective, lot of different players that are at work in this community, both in the US and Canada, and of course other countries. To an extent, we can say that engaging the community also means engaging other stakeholders in that decision-making process, [00:39:00] even when those decision makers are other large scale decision makers.

Now getting back to our list of things that SFI did over that time, they worked on nominating... they accepted nominations for a task group. From that, a task group was formed, and that task group worked together to draft the standard that really has evolved into the standard that is now at play. What I want to also make note of is after that first draft of the standard was created, it was released to the public, and that public option to review the standard was made available for 30 days. SFI made the draft version available both in French and English for folks to engage with out in both countries. That in and of itself is another form of engaging the community and doing so in a way that's inclusive of what your community made look like.

[00:40:00] Now we're into the multi-year process stage or the process here. 2022 rolled around, and after feedback was received from the public, the pulmonary draft standard was revised by the task group that was put together by SFI in the previous year. Then the task group worked together to create that second draft of the full standard. After that second draft was created, once again, the opportunity was made available for the public to engage. So, there was a second opportunity for public feedback to be provided on the standard. So again, you're seeing multiple opportunities for information, knowledge

exchange between the decision makers and the stakeholders who will ultimately be impacted by the decision. In the same respect, those stakeholders are now able to provide feedback in a way that will help the decision-makers determine the best way to move this decision forward [00:41:00] so that it's a best benefit to the full community. Multiple layers of this community engagement process here. I think it's also important to note that as the public was providing feedback, much of that was in written form, but there were also opportunities to provide additional information by way of public webinars that were made available through SFI. In those webinars, the SFI team worked to break down the objectives of the standards to provide transparency around the standard development process. Again, it provided for opportunities for questions, ideas, concerns to be shared in all directions.

Finally, now we get to 2023. Again, multi-year process, but finally in 2023, the standard was both finalized and launched. I just want to again bring your attention to the fact that this was a process that took some time. It took multiple attempts and multiple strategies for engaging with the public, [00:42:00] and those strategies changed based on where things were in the standard development process. Early on should we create a standard? Let's see what the public thinks. Let's use a survey. Indirect technique. Later on in the process after learning from the survey that this public seemed to be in general agreement with creating a standard or provide general support for that, it was like, let's engage our full community of those who are helping to make decisions about urban forestry and arboriculture across, you know, a large proportion of North America. So, it was let's bring different folks to the table. And then after that, it was let's build this standard by way of this task group, which we'll go into in just a minute. Then after that, it was let's look at what the standard looks like to the eyes of the public who are going to be looking at it once it's launched and made official in a few years, and let's give the public opportunities for feedback.

So, you can see again the fact that community engagement takes time. [00:43:00] You have to be adaptive to where you are in your process, and you've gotta make space for multiple voices to be heard in multiple ways. So, one last thing I want to go over as we think through this SFI example is just that task group. The task group did work hard to draft those standards, but that development of the task group did require some form of community engagement. Like I shared, there was opportunities for folks to nominate themselves to others to be a part of the task group, and the task group was really given the opportunity to help move the process forward. But what was prioritizing forming that task group was the group being formed of a diverse representation of folks from various interest groups and areas of expertise and professional affiliations, genders, races, and geographic locations. The group was tasked with responsibilities for drafting and revising versions of the standard, and ultimately their work was kind of signed off on by the SFI board of directors. [00:44:00] From that task group, you had members that represent NGOs from the United States and Canada. You had folks who did work in utility forestry and vegetation management, folks in the nursery industry indigenous people, folks from academia. Municipal and federal governments were represented along with a host of other folks. Engaging these members of different parts of the urban forestry community allowed for the development of a standard that ultimately helped to represent the diverse interests that may be represented by the communities that would eventually engage with that standard once it had been launched.

With all those stages of community engagement wrapped up into the process of developing this urban forestry standard, I think one cool additional lesson learned is that the task force identified that if we're doing anything urban forestry [00:45:00] and we're creating a standard for urban forestry, then ultimately, we need to make sure that community engagement is prioritized in the standard. So, the first objective in this standard is one directly tied to community engagement. Objective one as you can see here is tied to community, people, and Indigenous participation. I think it speaks volumes that as we

move forward in this novel, first-of-its-kind urban forestry standard and certification that folks can pursue that they know that above all, community engagement has to be top of the list, because we can take care of these trees in our cities all day. For our community, that's not necessarily that challenging, right? We have the technical skills to do so, but it's of minimal value if we don't prioritize and make space for the people who live in the communities where we're taking care of these trees. So, I think that that's just a really important takeaway, [00:46:00] and it's just a cool note to see that SFI prioritize that in the standard.

I think as we wrap up today's lesson, it's important for all of us to be thinking about the fact that as we move forward and whatever our urban forestry initiatives are, it's undeniable. It's not debatable. We have to be taking care of our trees. We have to make sure that the decisions we make around our tree selection, care, management, stewardship are technically sound, and that we prioritize implementing state-of-the-art knowledge to take care of our trees. But we have to put just as much weight, just as much priority in making sure that we are engaging the community, the stakeholders who live, work, play in our neighborhoods, in our areas of influence, in our jurisdiction just as much as we're prioritizing our trees, because the people are going to be impacted by our decisions, and if we engage effectively, then ultimately, [00:47:00] we're helping ourselves to really strengthen and broaden our network of community tree stewards who are going to ultimately benefit from the decisions made around trees, and in the long term can continue to help to take care of the trees that populate our towns, wherever it is we may find ourselves in the now.

With that, I'll leave you with a few concluding thoughts, key takeaways for me and potentially for you. But when we think about effective community engagement, it's important that we understand that ultimately whatever we do with our trees and our management and care of the trees and the places where we work, it's all happening within the context of these larger societal factors that are going to impact the way that we engage with the community and ultimately how the community wants to engage with us, and maybe even more importantly than that, how the community wants to and is engaging with the trees in which you know the areas where they live.

[00:48:00] I think it's also really important for us to remember that we have to understand what are the plethora of strategies that are available for us to really effectively engage the community. We can make decisions on the strategies that we need to engage based on where we are and our planning process or management process. We can be using indirect techniques like surveys, our fact sheets, our concerned sheets. We can be using direct methods of engagement like holding focus group meetings, but you know, building from the Philadelphia example, maybe it's more than that. Maybe we can be doing more than that. Maybe we can be providing people compensation to serve as the liaison between various communities, various neighborhoods, various community groups, and those who may be in decision-making power and municipal offices. I think from the SFI model, we have to continue to provide different ways for people to provide feedback. [00:49:00] If we have, you know, draft plans that we are thinking through and thinking about implementing, creating feedback periods through which people can provide feedback through email or response forms, what have you, extremely important.

Again moving on to our third point here, thinking about Philly, thinking about SFI, thinking about local leaders that you know and maybe even people within your organization. We need to be learning from the best practices that have been identified by model programs or from our own past experiences, and we have to be willing to and open to adopting those practices when it makes sense to and adapting them to our specific needs as we may need to. Nothing wrong with a little flexibility. Last but not least, it is extremely important to budget for the amount of time and resources that are going to be needed to

ensure that whatever proven engagement strategies we choose to pursue will be of lasting impact. [00:50:00] Again, we saw with Philly, we saw with SSI, these were multiple year processes. It's never going to be an overnight solution. It's never going to be like a two-week fix, or maybe even a month. Sometimes it really is going to be multiple years. So, embrace that on the front end, budgeted for it as you set your list of goals, objectives, expectations, deliverables. And if you can budget for it, or budget for it from a financial perspective, which may look like again allocating funds over a multi-year period, it may look like developing a budget line for community engagement, right? Maybe hiring someone if it's a consulting firm. If it's community advocates, setting aside their resources, the financial resources needed to do that is also worth its weight in gold to adequately budget for.

So, with that I will thank you for your time. Please do not hesitate to reach out [00:51:00] if you have any follow-up questions or want to chat about this outside of this space. All the best to you as you move forward in your urban forestry and arboriculture initiatives. Bye.