BUZZ, BUZZ

13 Steps to Public Engagement

The City of Burlington led the kind of public engagement process that is rarely achieved because of budget constraints and staff limitations. Over the course of 12 months, the City pounded the pavement, using a number of creative techniques to try and reach a broad cross-section of Burlington and spread the word about the planBTV charrette. In today’s busy world, where there is no one way to reach people, Burlington set a new standard for outreach, inventing creative ways to engage the public and generate buzz.

1. Social Media

In this age of technology, planBTV used web-based tools to reach out to a large number of constituents. The planBTV Website gave more detailed information on the project and provided all materials and documents to anyone who was interested. The planBTV Facebook (with over 350 friends) offered a live forum for constant updates and discussions, especially to our younger population, mostly reaching the 18-35 year old population. Other tools such as Front Porch Forum and the BUZZ newsletter continued to reach a broad audience.
2. Speaker Series
Hundreds attended our free Speaker Series events aimed at providing background data and information, while also educating the larger public on best planning practices from around the country. Six events were held on topics including transportation, public health, housing, retail and real estate market, form-based codes from July 2011 to April 2012.

3. Public Meetings
In September 2011, the planBTV team held a public workshop, where about 60 residents explored ways to better connect Church Street Marketplace to the waterfront. In November 2011, planning staff visited each Neighborhood Planning Assembly for an interactive public input meeting during the annual Neighborhood Improvement Nights (NINs). Five separate meetings were held that were focused on sharing information and re-affirming the broad vision for each part of the city.

4. Word of Mouth
The City of Burlington Planning staff spent hours of time communicating directly with city departments, stakeholders, and members of the public. In person, word-of-mouth communication and having champions of the project were critical to generating energy and buzz.

5. Local Media
The local media channels/papers have recognized the importance of this project and have covered many of our events, including the charrette, as well as some of the milestones reached along the way.

6. Art Contest
Public Art is an important component of what makes Burlington such a thriving community. PlanBTV went into the schools and offered kids a fun opportunity to participate in the project through an Art Contest that included four mediums (photo, drawing, essay, video). About 60 submissions were received and nearly 800 votes cast to determine the winners. An Art Juried Exhibit for professional artists (9 participated) provided us with their view of the “Essence of the City”.

Kids art projects tell a story about what is valued and important in their environment.

Below: Created by QuinnTrybus.
Right: Created by Jeremy Brotz.
7. The Road Show  
In an effort to reach a broad audience, the planBTV team attended numerous community events, such as the Farmer’s Market, mayoral debates during the campaign, and others.

8. Stakeholders  
Several meetings were held during the planning process with specific groups of stakeholders representing different constituencies, including the arts, environment, transportation, housing, elected officials, new Americans, Burlington Business Association, Burlington Young Professionals, and more.

9. Direct Communication!  
Monthly project updates and email invitations were sent directly to stakeholders who signed onto our Constant Contact email list (1,200 subscribers). Direct post mailing to downtown residents and businesses also provided updates.

10. Survey  
The planBTV Community Survey, with its online and paper versions, offered a great way to get the community’s pulse on different issues early in the planning process, and re-affirm the common vision that citizens have for Burlington.

11. Public Input Web Tool  
This web tool was developed after receiving countless public comments during the planBTV public outreach and engagement process. It gave everyone a chance to see the comments and ideas we have heard at meetings, during the charrette, or through email. Tens of thousands of votes were cast by over a thousand people who used this innovative tool!

12. Draft planBTV Review  
A first draft of this planBTV document was release mid-July 2012, giving everyone a chance to review and comment. Paper copies were made available and a website was built that incorporated commenting capabilities. Finally, a planBTV Open House was held at the end of September for two days, providing an opportunity for the public to review, discuss, and comment on the draft. Over 600 comments were received and analyzed to prepare the final plan.

“I have never seen a municipality work so hard to engage the public in a planning process. Burlington planning staff have tried so many ways of getting out the word, really creative strategies to make people aware of this exciting project and inspire them to get involved.”  
— Brian Wright, Town Planning & Urban Design Collaborative
13. Charrette

n: an intensive planning process

From January 24 through January 30, 2012, the citizens of Burlington were invited to participate in a multi-day planning and design charrette to develop a vision for the downtown and waterfront using smart growth and sustainable design principles.

A charrette is an intensive design workshop that involves anyone interested in or concerned about the future of their community. The Burlington charrette provided an open forum for the public to work closely with the City and planning consultants from Town Planning & Urban Design Collaborative (TPUDC) to identify big ideas and generate a comprehensive vision for the future.

The charrette was held in the heart of the city at 1 Church Street. The charrette team, along with City planning staff, set up a full working office and studio at the site, with over 500 members of the public stopping by to attend meetings, provide input, or talk with the planners.
Opening presentation during the Burlington charrette.

Citizens work over base maps, indicating with dots what they love about Burlington, what needs improvement, and places of opportunity.

Small groups make notes on base maps, jotting down issues as well as big ideas for the future.

Small groups working over base maps.

Representatives from each table group present their 5 big ideas to the entire assembly, drawing attention to a number of common themes shared by the citizens of Burlington.
On the first evening of the charrette, TPUDC delivered an introductory presentation on planning and smart growth principles at City Hall. Immediately following the presentation, the TPUDC charrette team facilitated a hands-on design workshop where the public was invited to roll up their sleeves, draw and brainstorm their ideas for improving the downtown and waterfront, working over base maps to identify key areas where infill, redevelopment, or other interventions should be focused.

On the second and third day of the charrette, the team conducted technical meetings on a variety of topics important to the project. These included economic development, social services, public safety, infrastructure, transportation, development, waterfront, environmental concerns, arts, and culture. Meanwhile, members of the team began developing plan alternatives, while gathering information real time from these meetings.

On the third night of the charrette, a public pin-up was held in the studio, giving the team a chance to present alternative plan scenarios based on ideas generated by the public. Over 75 people assembled to see the draft plans and provide feedback on what they liked about the ideas presented, and where further work was needed.

During the remainder of the charrette, members of the public continued to filter into the studio, adding their ideas at the base map station, talking to the team, and filling out questionnaires. Feeding off this buzz of activity, the team entered production mode, synthesizing ideas, collaborating over design challenges, preparing renderings, compiling precedent images, and drawing up the final master plan.

Based on all the input from the public gathered at the Hands-on Workshop, stakeholder meetings, the intermediate pin-up, and drop-ins, the charrette team developed a final preferred master plan for the downtown and waterfront. The master plan captures the spirit of Burlington and depicts possible redevelopment and infill scenarios, building configurations, parks and plazas, street connections, and public facilities.
“This week-long event in January 2012 was one of the largest public engagement efforts the city has ever undertaken, with over 500 people participating in different ways and when it was convenient for them. The charrette offered residents, business leaders and the planBTV team the opportunity to actively work together on the plan for an entire week.”

—Sandrine Thibault, CITY OF BURLINGTON, Comprehensive Planner

A final presentation took place on the last day of the charrette, at which time all of the work produced during the week was presented and explained. The meeting was attended by over 200 members of the community, with many people sticking around for the full 3 hours to ask questions, provide feedback, and express the support of the plan.

Though there was a great deal of enthusiasm and excitement around the plan, many difficult questions were also raised, a clear sign that the final charrette presentation was just the beginning of Burlington’s effort to move forward with its new vision for the future.