

# Co-Designing for Public Participation: Developing a Relationship-Based Toolkit for Public Engagement with the Utah Transit Authority

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## Abstract

Intentionally planned and well-executed public engagement with public sector organizations has the potential to make government agencies better equipped to effectively and equitably serve the public, especially for communities and relevant and affected parties who do not feel heard by the agencies meant to serve them. While the importance of institutions seeking public input is widely recognized, it is also true that the design of input collection is crucial, and even well-intentioned approaches to engage the public can fail. Transportation agencies—organizations in charge of managing public transportation and other transit infrastructure—often struggle to address the needs of communities because they lack a clear understanding of public priorities, fear that input is not representative of the entire service population, and do not have the tools or processes in place to translate them into real decision-making power. Public agencies are left grappling with how to conduct public engagement that is impactful, influential, and equitable.

For the Utah Transit Authority (UTA) this is no more true than in preparation for Change Day, an annual day in August when many changes to transit lines are implemented. This yearly event presents a particularly difficult challenge, as service changes directly impact everyday rider experience. Often engagement ends up

feeling like a box-checking activity or a task to be in compliance with regulations that does not yield actionable insights for Change Day service planning. In addition, planners and UTA team members work to prioritize equity in plans, which can be in conflict with the desires expressed through public engagement.

Alongside the UTA community engagement team, the UTA service planning team, and other UTA team members I conducted an analysis of the current Change Day public engagement process through design-led workshops with both UTA and members of the public. The result is a four-part toolkit that speaks to key elements of the engagement process through an equity lens and a service blueprint that points future practitioners to important areas of the relationship between agencies and the public.

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