

Storytelling Creates Inclusive Planning

My first afternoon as a temporary resident of Cleveland's Buckeye neighborhood, I stepped outside and a man in his 60s waved from his own house across the street.

"Don't you hide behind that car," he called, grinning. "Come here and give me a hug." When he said he was "The Mayor of 117th Street," I knew I'd met the right person first. I was there to talk to residents and record their stories—and he knew everything about everyone.

I soon met the owner of one of the last surviving independent record stores in Cleveland. A neighbor showed me around the nearby community garden. And the "mayor" himself invited me to pass out free hotdogs to neighborhood kids and attend a public meeting on crime and safety.

It was June 2015, and I was beginning the Sidewalks of Buckeye project, funded by the Saint Luke's

Foundation. The goal was to learn about the people the foundation serves and help deepen the neighborhood's public narrative beyond the familiar tropes of disorder and neglect. While Buckeye faces real challenges—crime, vacancy, foreclosure—it is also a place where, like everywhere, people strive to live their best possible lives.

As a planner with a background in journalism, I learned an invaluable lesson. To reflect the hopes and concerns of a neighborhood, planners must listen to, share, and act on the stories of its residents—especially in communities that have felt unheard.

The stories I shared online received many enthusiastic responses—and helped inform local planning processes. A community development corporation used them as a launching point for understanding preexisting conditions for a retail study. A university mapped social connections in the neighborhood, adding commentary from people featured on the blog. And a public art nonprofit invited the subjects to participate in creating streetscape projects.

Storytelling is a powerful tool for creating urban planning processes that are truly inclusive. While traditional community engagement methods like public meetings and surveys remain effective ways of gathering voices, not everyone feels comfortable in those settings. They also have the drawback of being future-oriented. They carry

the implication that the community as it exists now is not "good enough." This can lead to fears (often justified by history) that what is already there and working will be displaced.

Stories, by contrast, honor the past and present. They can be real and nuanced in a way that formal statements and survey responses cannot, and they do not need to focus on future, outside-defined "goals"—even well-intentioned ones such as creating an arts district or a more walkable commercial corridor. This allows planners and the public at large to gain a deeper understanding of the people and places they serve.

Gathering stories isn't easy, but the rewards more than compensate for the time and energy invested.

Candor requires trust, and that takes an ongoing presence, as I've learned while continuing my work in Buckeye. Four years after I helped launch the Sidewalk project, dozens more stories have been featured. Today, the series is produced as a podcast and a blog and often cross-posted on the local public media company's website. Future projects using a similar model will look at a public housing neighborhood about to undergo a planning process and the redevelopment of a historic transit-oriented square.

This willingness to listen and amplify all voices may be our best chance to build trust between planning professionals and the neighborhoods that have often viewed them askance. It's also an opportunity to contribute to places that truly reflect the people who live there.



Justin Glanville is a writer, urban planner, and the founder of Sidewalk. He is based in Cleveland and works regionally and nationally. To read and hear the stories he's collected, visit oursidewalk.com.