Unveiling the Potential: Jefferson's Journey of Inclusive Community Engagement
TXAPA- Student Project Award

- Letter(s) of support---A minimum of 1 letter of support is required
  - 📄 Letter of Support_Robin Moore.pdf
  - 📄 Letter of Support_ Melissa Boyd.pdf
- Nominated plan, policy or document
  - 📄 City of Jefferson Engagement Report.pdf
  - https://texastargetcommunities.mysocialpinpoint.com/jefferson
- Other supporting documents
  - 📄 Appendix.pdf
- News articles, public outreach materials, photos, etc.
  - 📄 SOA-News.pdf '
  - https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1HgKrpVhf3lrjJvIkt7s0YpOk3YPJQCFS?usp=sharing
  - https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1s86rB64bPqSp2wuaw_kZjZjDrJJ_P3nq?usp=sharing
- 300 words for each criteria

Graduate planning students designed and facilitated the first engagement process in Jefferson, Texas, as part of the Texas Target Communities program (TxTC) and the Department of Landscape Architecture and Urban Planning at Texas A&M University. The City of Jefferson and the Jefferson Economic Development Corporation collaborated to understand community priorities and inform the development of the comprehensive plan.

1. Innovation. Originality of concept or appreciable refinement of existing techniques or Procedures

The Jefferson Economic Development Corporation and the Jefferson City Council contacted Texas Target Communities to help the community plan for the future. While the City had worked with a consulting firm to conduct a planning and capacity study in 2019, the community had never come together to discuss their needs and priorities. Small, rural communities like Jefferson (pop.1830) often lack the capacity and resources to develop plans or conduct robust community engagement. The new partnership with TAMU presented an opportunity to connect with residents, review and validate the findings of the previous planning study, and foster a collaborative envisioning of the future.

In the fall of 2022, second-year graduate students in the Master of Urban Planning program in the Communication in Planning course undertook the engagement process. Students developed a multifaceted approach embracing traditional public meetings, interactive pop-up engagements, and cutting-edge virtual technology. To enable broader participation, students used Social Pinpoint, which allowed residents to engage from the comfort of their homes. This

innovative tool facilitated interactive mapping exercises and virtual discussions, providing a convenient and accessible avenue for participation.

Additionally, planning students conducted multiple small-group stakeholder meetings to ensure community leaders and champions engaged and provided diverse perspectives in the community. Targeted stakeholder interviews allowed for focused discussions with members of the community who possess special expertise or interests, further enriching the planning process.

By utilizing an inclusive and equitable engagement process, the City of Jefferson is now equipped with a good understanding of the community's needs, priorities, and concerns. The resulting document is the first step for this small town to harness local knowledge and amplify the voices of residents, businesses, and stakeholders.

2. Transferability. Potential application to other locations, projects, or areas of planning Interest

Students took great care to comprehend the unique dynamics of the community. Because of the tourism-focused development and concentration of businesses in the downtown area, other neighborhoods have seen disproportionate investment and planning. Hence, the students devised a tailored engagement plan to reach unheard voices. For example, they relocated the public workshop venue from downtown to a historic African American neighborhood community center. This new venue was a familiar, inviting, safe, and accessible location to all residents and, most importantly, encouraged the participation of the African American residents.

Additionally, the team collaborated with Jefferson High School to conduct outreach activities and engage Jefferson's youth. High school students utilized the Social Pinpoint platform to identify community assets and areas of improvement. Youth bring fresh perspectives and offer unique insights into their generation's challenges, aspirations, and needs. Additionally, connecting youth to planning provides an educational opportunity and fosters a retention of residents empowered to shape the community they will lead. Leveraging technology like interactive virtual engagement and connecting planning students with school-going students might be a successful way to meaningfully engage children and youth.

The four engagement activities – a public meeting, pop-up events, an online engagement website, and stakeholder interviews – were designed to reach a diverse group to ensure an accurate representation of Jefferson's population. They recognized the significance of considering the needs of various groups, such as residents, business owners, community leaders, and visitors, to ensure an inclusive and accessible process. While the selection of the methods and location may be unique to Jefferson, other places can apply a similar approach for meaningful engagement.

3. Quality. Excellence of thought, analysis, writing, graphics, and character of presentation

One notable aspect of the project's quality was the visually appealing graphics, concise synthesis, and presentation of complex information. The students distilled the existing conditions data into accessible snippets, which they shared online and at the public meeting through interactive trivia games. This approach gamified the data presentation and made the information easy to digest, keeping the audience engaged and facilitating the data-driven community engagement process. Additionally, students developed informative maps to provide participants with a spatial tool to contextualize conversations, discuss ideas, and capture location-based needs.

Throughout the engagement process, students listened attentively to capture the sentiments and aspirations of the diverse stakeholders. Public engagement efforts resulted in 128 total surveys submitted, 232 map dots for location-specific comments, and 992 other written statements. Students analyzed the data gathered from public meetings, surveys, stakeholder interviews, and engagement activities deriving meaningful insights like common themes and emerging needs. Finally, they compiled all the information in an accessible report to present a comprehensive roadmap for action. By visually representing strengths and challenges, the report provides the location-based opportunities and gaps of investment.

The commitment to conducting thorough and meaningful community outreach was a cornerstone of the project. The report includes a table analyzing participation to identify underrepresented and overrepresented groups by comparing the demographic breakdown of participants to expected participation levels based on data from the US Census Bureau. The main goal of the information is to help the City prioritize the focus of targeted engagement in the future.

4. Implementation. Effectiveness of the work (proposals have been carried out, show promise of being carried out, or demonstrate an effective implementation technique)

Students collaborated with community partners from the City and JEDCO to create a stakeholder list of community leaders and champions. Using the list, they actively engaged with 81 local stakeholders promoting the engagement effort, building connections, and establishing trust and rapport in the community. As part of the focus group interviews, students interviewed stakeholders, including city staff, city leadership, Planning and Zoning Commission, Economic Development Corporation, Chamber of Commerce, schools, health care providers, real estate agents, and developers, the housing authority, religious groups, and community-based organizations. Engaging these groups of stakeholders was essential to build the foundation of planning and effective implementation.

The public engagement process successfully reached a diverse audience who engaged in conversation on Jefferson's assets, voiced their needs and concerns, and found common

ground to influence government decision-making. By casting as wide of a net as possible through various public engagement activities, the team gathered a broad range of opinions and ideas from over 200 members of the Jefferson community. The findings of this engagement effort capture the current thoughts and views of the community and serve to set priorities for future growth. The public input obtained from these activities is intended to help elected officials understand community priorities, identify locations that need more attention and development, and inform city initiatives, programs, and capital improvements.

In December 2022, students presented the findings at the City Council Meeting. They also provided the complete report with all the community comments to the city leaders and staff and shared the document online for the public. The process has enhanced community-wide discussion about community needs, issues, assets, and desires. After completing this process, the community is working towards developing a comprehensive plan in partnership with Texas Target Communities.

5. Application. Planning principles have been applied or observed, especially in considering a project's effects on other public objectives

Through the engagement process, the students discovered Jefferson's greatest strength lies in its close-knit community. Residents passionately expressed their deep-rooted connection to the city, highlighting the welcoming atmosphere that embraces both residents and visitors. Jefferson was seen as a destination with its vibrant downtown, unique tourism experience, and a strong sense of character and identity.The engagement process also highlighted the strained relationships between socioeconomic groups and a disproportionate focus on the downtown area, emphasizing the importance of balanced development and equitable opportunities for all neighborhoods. Planning for aging infrastructure, housing affordability, and access to health emerged as priorities.

Stakeholders highlighted the diversifying local businesses and industries to enhance economic growth and provide employment opportunities, creating a thriving local economy. They also emphasized investing in Complete Streets to improve connectivity and ease mobility challenges. Amidst challenges, the engagement process revealed numerous opportunities to harness Jefferson's untapped potential. Stakeholders identified the significance of embracing Jefferson's environmental features, such as its proximity to Caddo Lake and Lake O' the Pines. They also stressed on the empowerment of the younger generation, to actively shape the city's future.

With a clear understanding of Jefferson's strengths, challenges, and opportunities, the students have laid the groundwork for the city's long-term planning process. The insights and recommendations from the community captured in the engagement report provide a roadmap for Jefferson's leaders and stakeholders to plan for the future collaboratively.