

A Year Without Dots

Kicking the Sticky Habit in Public Engagement

GPA 2025 Fall Conference | October 8–10, 2025



Meet Your Speakers



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Who We Are | TSW



21 Planners
(13 with AICP accreditation)

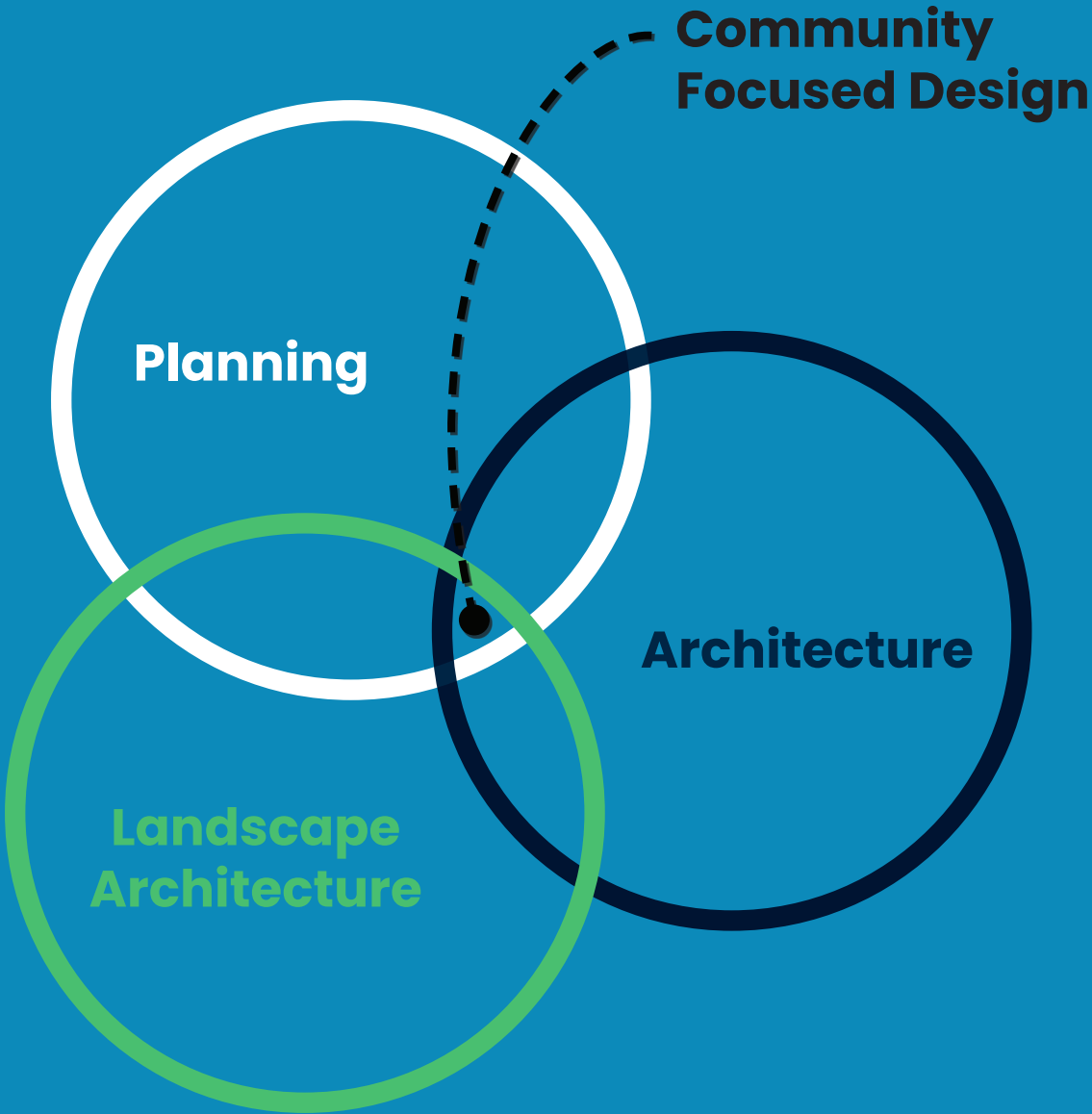
4 Registered Architects

6 Architectural Designers

11 Registered Landscape Architects

5 Landscape Designers

4 Transportation Planners



Who We Are | Gwinnett County

Population: over 1 million

Area: ~437 square miles

County seat: Lawrenceville

One of the most diverse
counties in Georgia ***and the
United States***



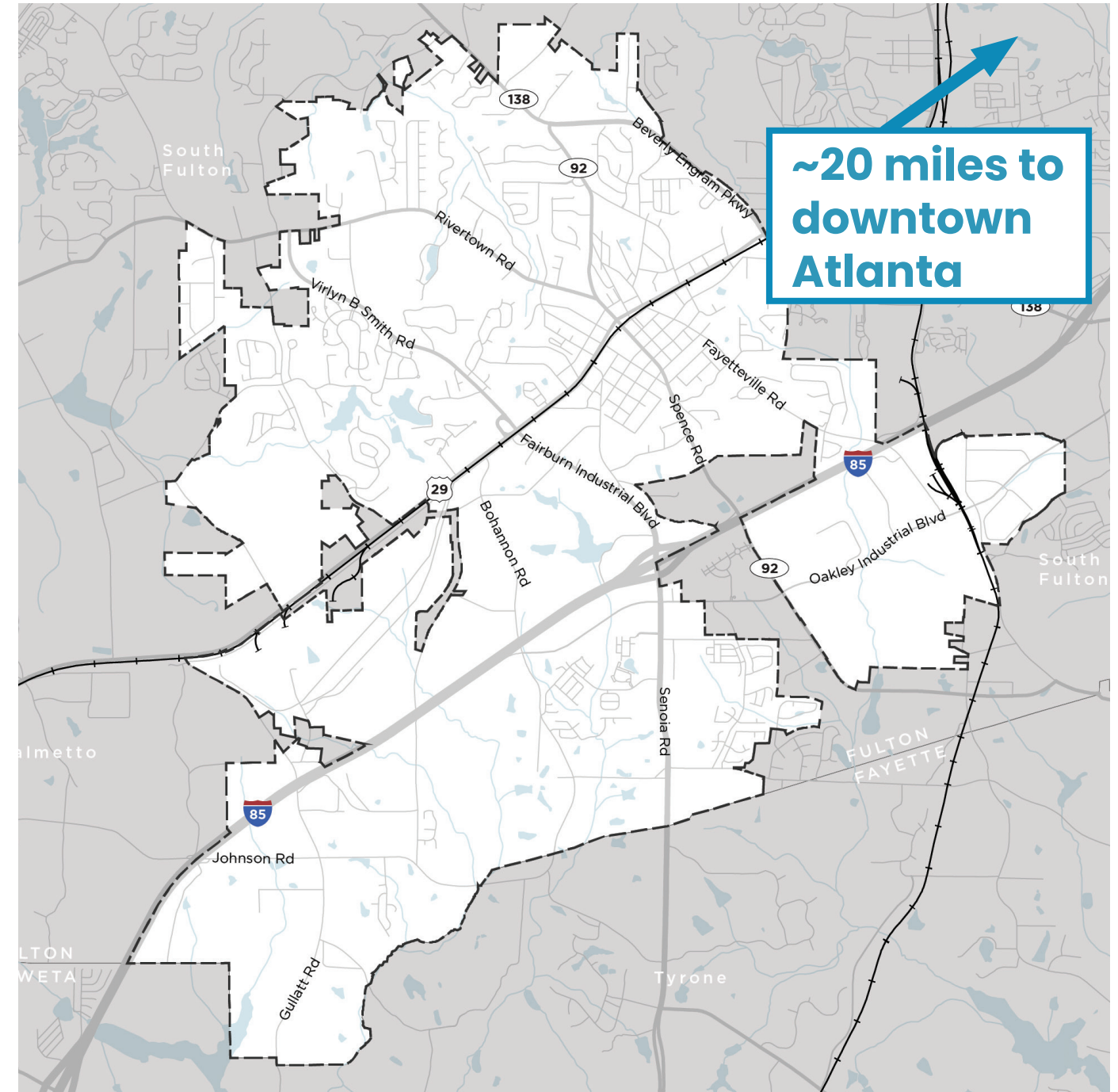
Who We Are | City of Fairburn

Population: ~18,000

Area: ~17 square miles

Distance from:

- Hartsfield Jackson: ~15 miles
- I-75: ~16 miles
- Downtown Atlanta: ~20 miles



**~20 miles to
downtown
Atlanta**

Session Agenda

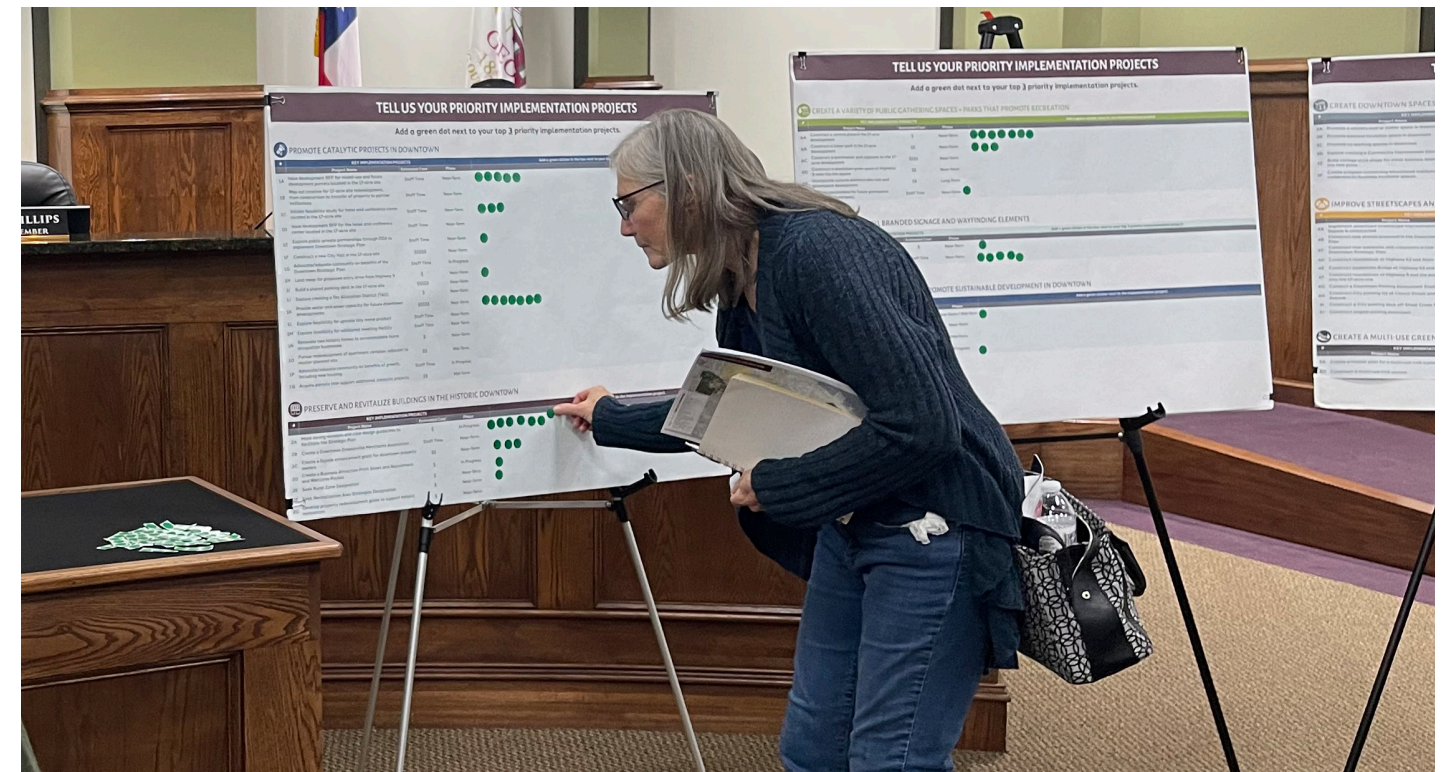
- What does engagement typically look like?
- What kinds of activities did we come up with?
- How has this impacted our clients' engagement strategies?
- What surprised us in this process?
- What did we learn?
- Interested in going dot-less?





What does engagement typically look like?

When you think of engagement...



There has to be a better way...



GWINNETT COUNTY GOVERNMENT

Preference Survey

Character

What are we doing today?

Station One

• Evaluate current Downtown recommendations

Station Two

• Provide current questions & provide aspects of Downtown

Station Three

• General Feedback / Comments

Like

Dislike

Neutral

Traditional

Mixed

Modern

TRADITIONAL SINGLE FAMILY HOMES ONLY

Gwinnett



The pledge:

I, _____, pledge my commitment to a year without dots.

From August 1, 2024, to August 1, 2025, I will abstain from using dots.

I will break my addiction to dots, using alternative means to engage the public.

I will provide our communities, with better, more fun things to do at meetings.

I will provide our clients with more creative input ideas for advancing their projects and the community's vision.

I will not use squares, stars, or other shapes under the false pretense that they are not actually dots. That's cheating.

I am committed to a future of better public engagement.

I hereby sign this pledge to commit to a year without dots.



**What kinds of activities
did we come up with?**

Cataloging Each Engagement Activity

For each engagement activity:

- Overview.
- This would work well for...
- This would NOT work well for...
- Ways to improve next time.
- Exercise type.
- Level of effort.
- Costs.

Exercise Type				
				Other: 
Tables	Stations	Individual	Group	

Level of Effort		
Preparing	Executing	Analyzing Results
  	  	  

Costs		
Hours Spent Preparing	Staff Needed to Execute	Direct Costs
15 hours	3 TSW Staff & 2-4 active city staff	Estimate \$100

Draw Your Map

- Participants draw mental maps of their city (i.e. streets, landmarks, personal routes).
- Helps inform future character areas or areas of need.
- Allows facilitators to understand how residents perceive their community by the elements they choose.

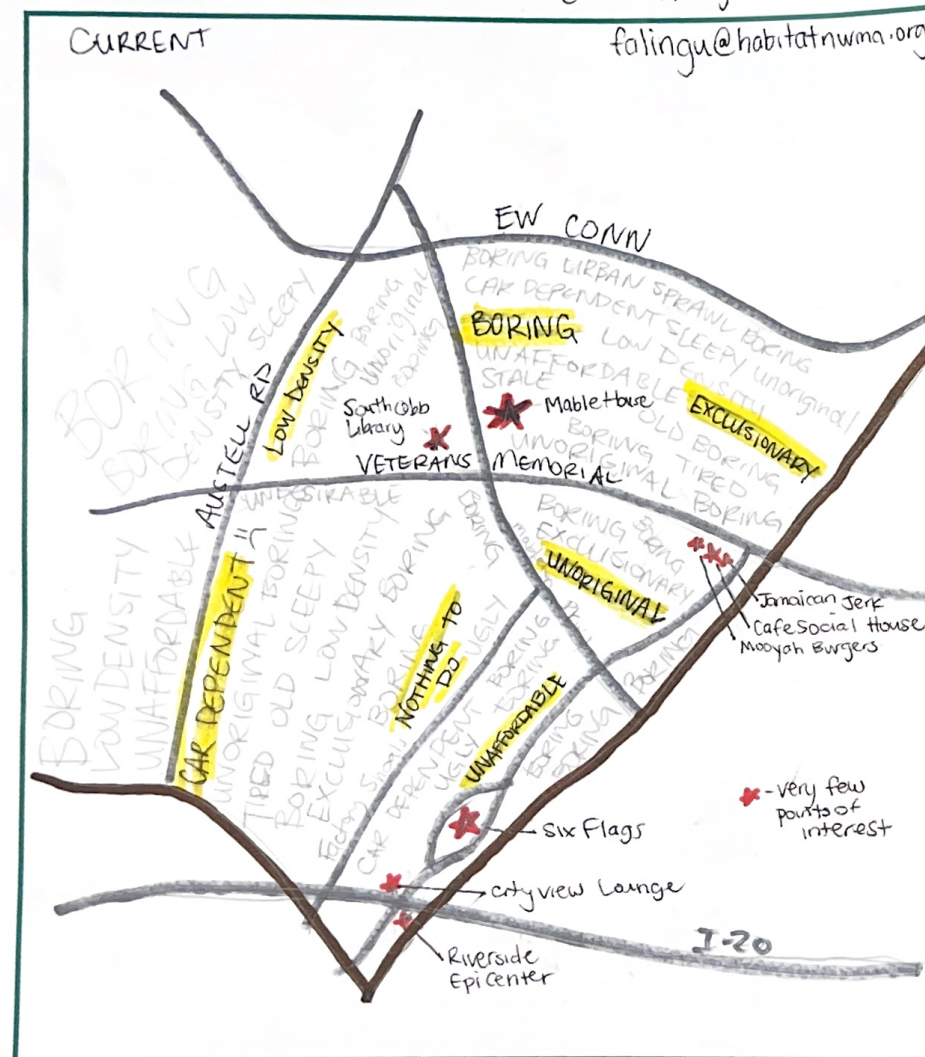
Activity 1



1 Draw Your Map

Felicia Alingu

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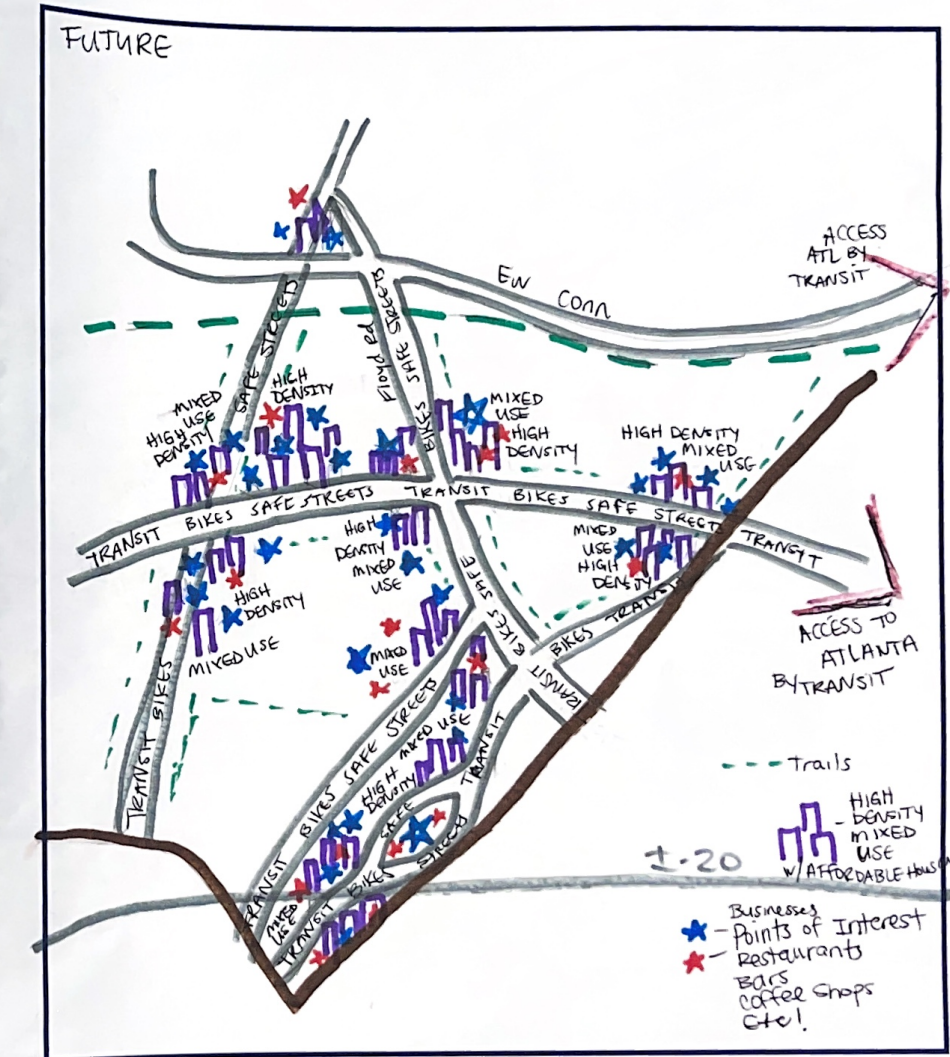


Activity 1



2 Make Your Vision Board

FUTURE



Needs and Opportunities Bingo

- At the beginning of a meeting, participants are given a bingo card and asked to fill in the blanks with their own needs and opportunities.
- Whenever they see/hear one, they mark it off until they hit five in a row.

B	I	N	G	O
	Address declining property values		Improve aging roads	
	Expand senior housing	Update zoning codes		Revitalize underutilized properties
Redevelopment of downtown				Leverage economic development tools
Expand park investments		Opportunity for workforce housing	Renaissance Festival	
	Sidewalk enhancement		Improve tree canopy protection	

Mad Libs

- Participants are given a Mad Libs exercise to complete to get a sense of their future vision.
- Works well for preliminary / kickoff meetings focused on visioning but can likely be adapted to later project phases!

CHOOSE YOUR OWN FUTURE FOR CENTERVILLE!

In my future Centerville, there will be quality _____ and _____ housing.
(housing type) (housing type)

New amenities, like _____,
(commercial retail)

will support the neighborhoods and enhance the community's _____. We might even
(neighborhood quality)

have a _____ for current and future
(new gathering space)

residents to appreciate!

Daily Community Café

A land use visioning workshop transformed into a “café”.

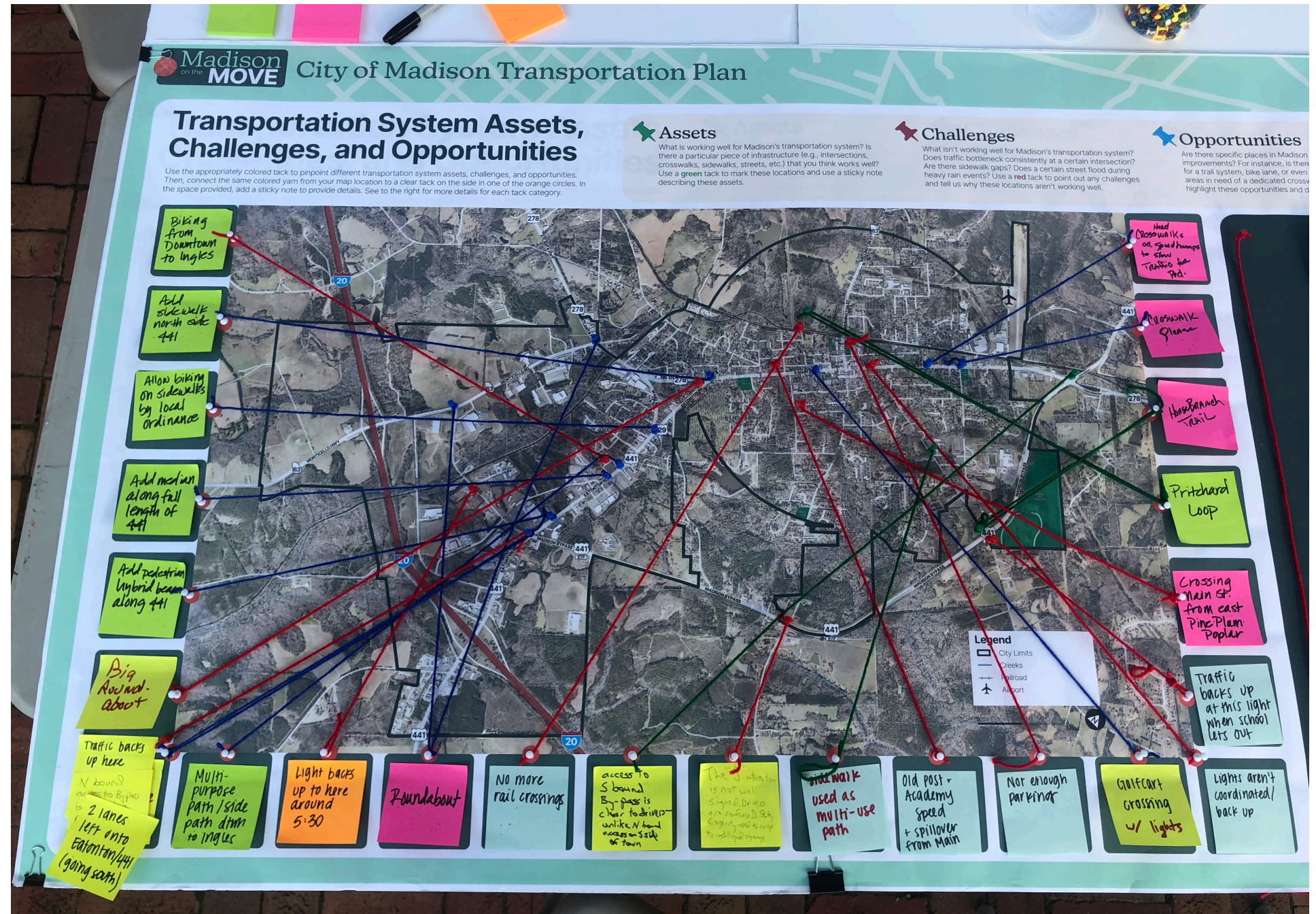
“Menus” facilitate the activities, placemats with background information, and three activity types:

- Appetizers: Ideal Community Amenities
- Entrees: Community Boundaries & Growth
- Dessert: Greenspace



Pin & Yarn Mapping

- Participants use different colored tacks to pinpoint various assets (green), challenges (red), and opportunities (blue) on a map.
- They then tie the string to a sticky note around the map where they could provide more detail.



Shop Your Vision

- Sometimes the venue inspires the format!
- Participants “shopped” at different stations for up to 10 items that they envision for the future of their community.
- Participants then “check out” with a member of the planning team (“the cashier”) who logs their responses.



STATION 1:

SHOP-TIL-YOU-DROP

Take a look at items that address improvements and opportunities in each of our “departments” and choose **up to 10**. Take them to the cash register for a receipt.



Growth Monopoly

- This activity uses Monopoly pieces to represent a forecasted number of households.
- Allows participants to visualize and determine the most appropriate locations and distribution for residential growth within the community.



Collaborative Mapping

Two-part mapping activity that allows participants to provide georeferenced answers to questions using coded stickers.



Activity #1

COLLABORATIVE MAPPING ACTIVITY

Step 1:

Take one of the matching stickers (#a) and place on the map to identify...

#a-#b

Places with an untold story

#a-#b

Places you would like to change or improve

#a-#b

Favorite places downtown

*Use as many stickers of each color as you like!

Step 2:

#a-#b #a-#b #a-#b #a-#b

Take your other matching sticker (#b) & place it on the designated comment boards & write down your thoughts

*Use as many stickers of each color as you like!

#b

Explain more about your untold story!

#b

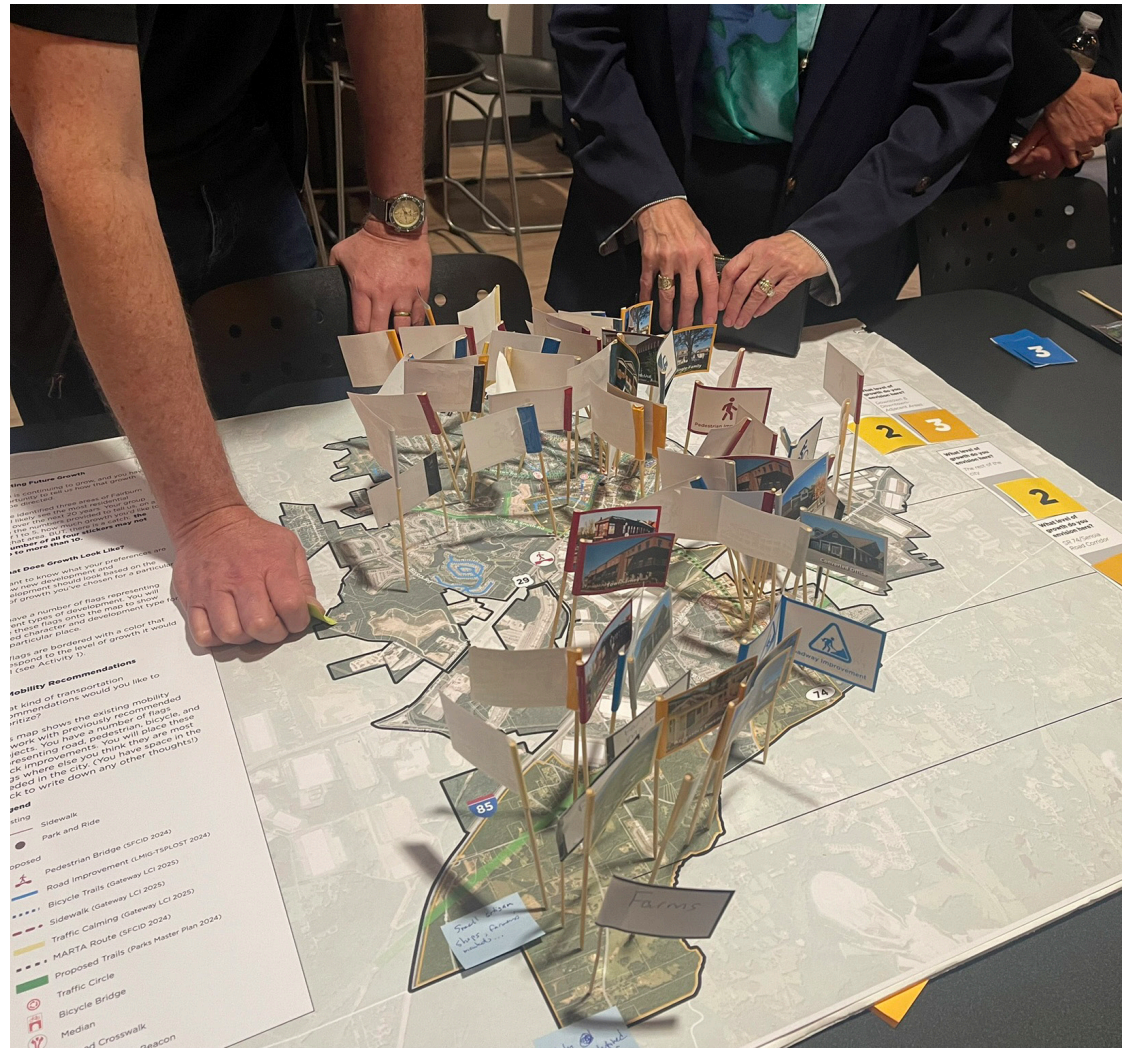
If I were Mayor, I would focus on...

#b

Why do you enjoy Downtown?

Plant Your Flag

- Participants identify types of improvements they would like to make by selecting a flag and placing it on a map.
- Two different versions: pre-written improvements or write your own!
- Can be adapted into a digital format.



Build Your Own Placemaking Palette

- At pop-up events, participants created a palette of their preferred colors, landscape design, and placemaking
- Pre-printed stickers to choose from



My Daily Community is: _____

Our Color Palette is:



Our Landscaping Design is:



We should focus on these 5 placemaking elements (place your top 5 below):



I think these would look great at this spot in my Daily Community:



I'm interested in getting involved in placemaking in my community. Here is my email address:

What else do you want to see in your Daily Community?

Collage Your Own FLU Map

- Participants create personalized land use maps by selecting different types of land use for each parcel.
- Some parcels are combined into larger ones to avoid small pieces and make it easier to work with.
- Each table provided a base map with information on each land use category option.



Build Your Own Greenspace

Create a personalized plan for a public greenspace by choosing custom stickers representing potential site elements, scaled to the map.



FORMER RED BANK MIDDLE SCHOOL SITE DESIGN YOUR PUBLIC SPACE!

Based on the 1,365 responses from the public survey conducted earlier this year, **8 acres** was the average amount of the 12-acre site that respondents felt should be devoted to greenspace, parks, and recreation.

We need your input on what site elements you would like to see in the 8 acres of greenspace, parks, and recreation! On the table, you will find a variety of potential site element stickers to choose from. The stickers are scaled to approximately represent the amount of space that element requires. Once you have filled in the allocated 8-acre space on your map, it will be complete. **Please note that the exact placement of the outlined areas are likely to change based on final designs to create the most suitable layout.**

Directions:

- Choose your preferred site elements and place them within the 8-acre red boundary on the adjacent map. **Each site must include parking and restrooms!**
- Use a marker to draw in trails/sidewalks.
- If you don't see something you want, draw/write it in!
- In the yellow boundary to the right, select what you want to be included in the additional 4-acres.

DON'T FORGET THE BACK!





How has this impacted our clients' engagement strategies?

Building on momentum:

- Be strategic
- Continuous engagement
- Leadership buy-in



Shaping engagement programming and predictability:

- Small Area Plan Outreach
- Public Education and Events:
 - Block Party
 - Communities Now
 - Future Programming





**What surprised us in
this process?**

Surprises

Not only were these activities more fun and engaging (for both us and the participants), we...

- Received **more input** and required people to think **more carefully/critically**
- Spurred more **in-depth** conversations
- Meeting **participants interacted with each other much more**
- Found that it had a “**disarming**” effect: people who came with an agenda were caught off guard by the different format, increased flexible input and more open to discussion.



Surprises

- Majority of participants have **reacted positively** to the activities!
- However, some participants will have strong reactions both ways: most loved that the activities were different and not boring, but some people complained because it wasn't what they were expecting....



A photograph of three people (two men and one woman) working together at a white table. They are surrounded by numerous small, colorful cards (yellow, green, red, purple) and markers. One man on the left is wearing a blue baseball cap with 'CEDAR RAPIDS' and a name tag that says 'HELLO MY NAME IS WADE COOK'. The woman in the center is leaning over the table, writing on a card. The man on the right is also leaning over the table. The background shows a window with white blinds. The text 'What did we learn?' is overlaid in the center of the image.

What did we learn?

Lessons Learned: Our Clients' Perspective

Effective communication is critical.

- Know your audience.

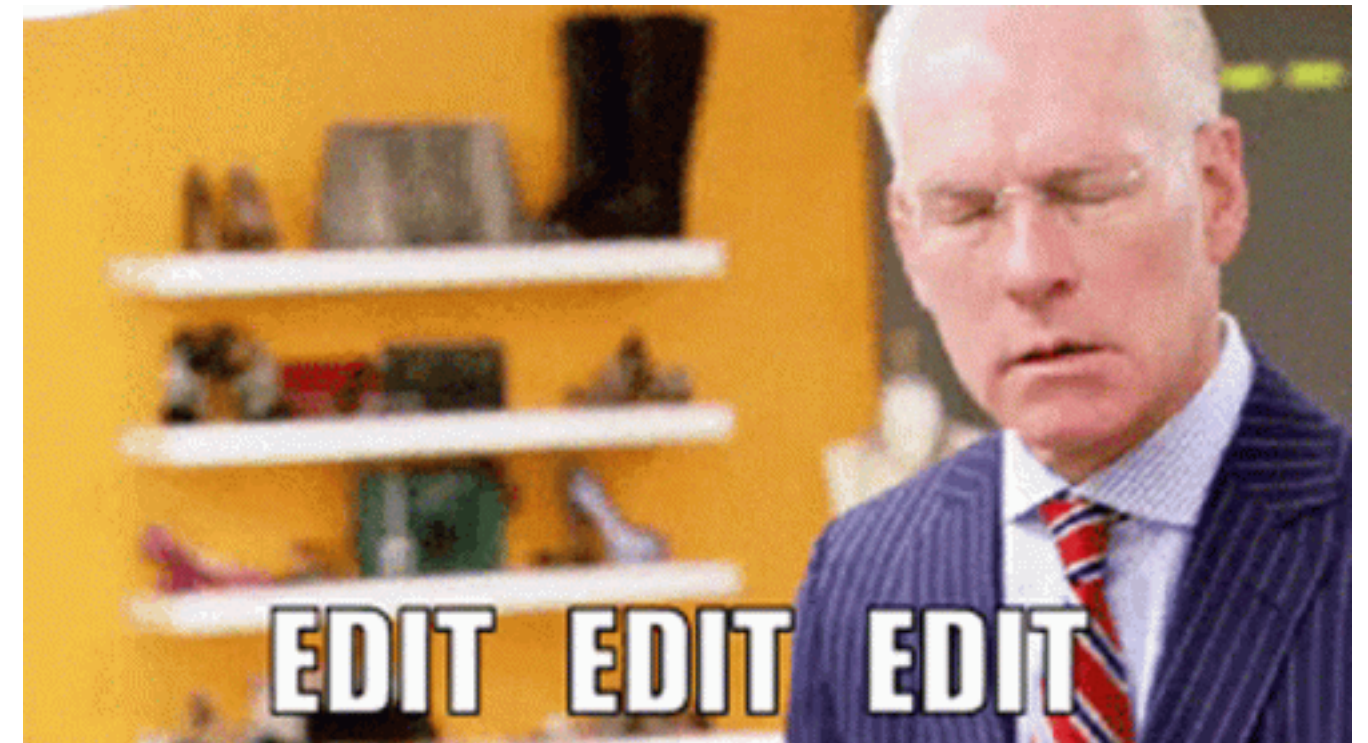
You'll set yourself up for success if you:

- Manage expectations
- Narrow/simplify the scope
- Brand each engagement opportunity properly



Lessons Learned

- Keep it as simple as possible. It's easy to get complicated really fast. In the words of Tim Gunn: **Edit, Edit, Edit!**
- It's way more **expensive**, in both time and materials—especially when you're building up that library with new activities.
- Focusing on **one activity per meeting** helps maximize efforts.





Interested in going dot-less?

Goldsby's Future Development (Land Development & Town Square)

Complete a comprehensive study/master plan of the water system

Conduct a detailed study and plan to ensure the water system meets current and future needs effectively.

Create a traffic and access management plan

Design a plan to improve traffic flow and ensure safe and efficient access for all types of transportation.

Proactively pursue funding for infrastructure improvement projects

Explore fees on new developments to help fund infrastructure improvements that support growth.

Actively seek grants and other funding sources to support major infrastructure upgrades.

Goldsby's Future Development (Land Development & Town Square)

Consider issuing a temporary moratorium on residential development until water infrastructure is improved

Complete a trail master plan to include community nature trails along the river, creeks, and wetlands

Consider establishing a farmers market

Consider public markets, farmers markets, and other community gathering spaces.

Goldsby's Future Development (Land Development & Town Square)

Improve public parking facilities at Goldsby Park

Design and construct bike lanes

Improve public transit service

Our Advice...

- Don't do a weird, out-of-the-box exercise just for the sake of doing something different...
- Activity should be specific to that project/community, and to the type of information you are seeking at that point in the project.
- Keep it as simple as possible!
- Go tactile! People felt more engaged when they were “making” something.
- Lean into the meeting's context—is there something special/different about the venue? The time of year?
- It's okay if something doesn't work as you had hoped; see what can be salvaged/refined from the first iteration and then use it in a future activity. You're re-training your brain!

Questions?



Thank You, and Give Us a Shout!

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