# LIVABLE CITY YEAR

## CITY OF TACOMA

University of Washington Tacoma

Urban Studies Program

TCMP 590: Master of Arts in Community
  Planning Practicum Project

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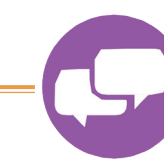  Lauren Miles
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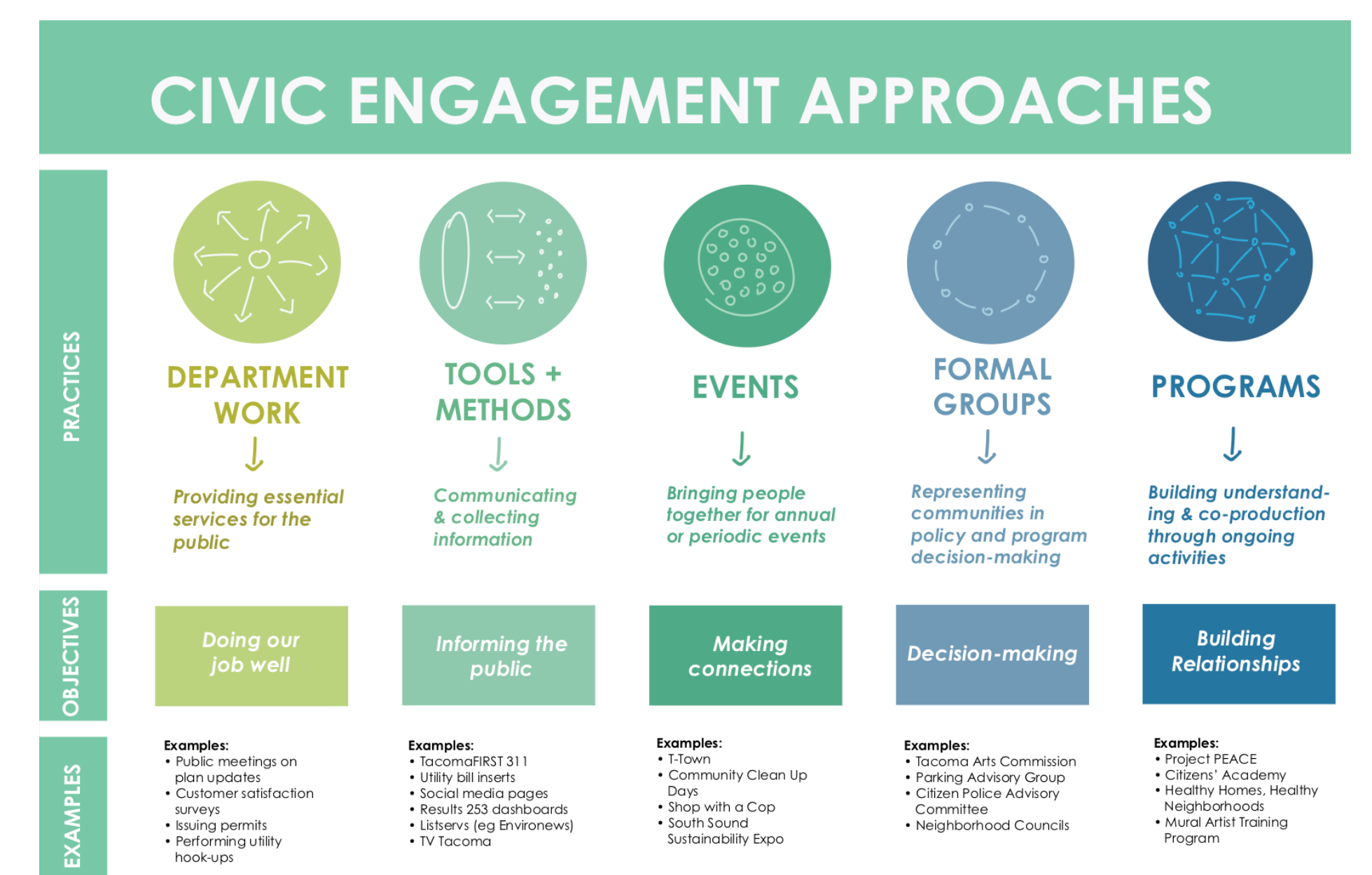
# A ROADMAP TO CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

## Introduction

The Roadmap to Civic Engagement project was conducted by the first cohort of students in the Community Planning graduate program at the University of Washington Tacoma. This project was identified as a priority by the City Manager's Office to yield an internal inventory of civic engagement practices at the City of Tacoma. The project stems from the Equity recommendations made in Tacoma 2025, which was created with the participation and input of over 2,000 residents. Generated from qualitative data directly from the City of Tacoma staff, students produced a report package of key findings, opportunities for investment, and a roadmap evaluation tool.



*A City employee at T-Town, one example of civic engagement efforts at the City of Tacoma.*

## Methodology

Students conducted over 60 interviews with City staff to gather data about their civic engagement practices across departments. Using grounded theory methodology, students analyzed and coded the data while allowing for the emergence of a thorough understanding of the organizational practices around civic engagement. In addition to the interviews and analysis, students also held two workshops with City staff to receive further input on these findings.



*Students held two meetings with City staff to further refine initial findings.*

Photo Credit: Marie Hoffman



**CIVIC ENGAGEMENT APPROACHES**

*Students developed these categories of civic engagement approaches based on interviews with City of Tacoma staff. This diagram helps to identify the specific **objectives** that particular civic engagement **practices** are often designed to achieve.*

## Key Findings

● **Values of Civic Engagement:** Civic engagement is valued across departments as a path to building equity in the City of Tacoma, which is taking steps to align practices with its values. However, departments lack a consistent set of standards, support, or resources to carry this out.

● **Variation in Practice:** In practice, civic engagement varies widely across City departments, reflecting differences in the core organizational roles, responsibilities, target populations, and goals. Recognizing this variability, uniform standardization of civic engagement across the city poses significant challenges in practice, such as:

● **Access and Representation:** The City struggles to have broad engagement in decision-making, and under-represented communities are often not heard. This discrepancy can skew the City's understanding of the public.

● **Understanding Each Other:** Because of a perception that the public doesn't understand city government, significant resources are spent producing and distributing information. This one-way, transactional approach can limit the opportunity for two-way dialogue and collaboration.

● **Flashpoints and Catalysts:** Flashpoints can emerge surrounding controversial issues, causing the City to invest considerable energy on specific decisions. However, these moments can also be catalysts for more meaningful engagement.

In an effort to help City staff meet these challenges, students have elicited opportunities and developed a tool tailored to the City of Tacoma, including:

- Civic Engagement Steering Group: A cross-departmental group of staff to help guide and implement organization-wide civic engagement strategy.

- Tools for More Inclusive Civic Engagement Practices:
  - Statement of Values: A draft statement of organizational values.
  - Designing Purposeful Civic Engagement: A reflective tool for staff to use when designing department-level engagement.

- Recommendations for Increased Resourcing for Civic Engagement