



South Hill Community Engagement Report

Engagement Recommendations for Pierce County, WA

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Our Team



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Amber is a senior majoring in CEP and Geography: Data Science with a minor in Urban Ecological Design. With foundational experience ranging from urban ecology with UW's Native Plant Nursery to large-scale event planning, she thrives in collaborative spaces and one-on-one engagement with communities. As a first-generation student, Amber aims to create community-based ecological design projects in marginalized urban communities.



Kate Donnelly, *she/her*

Kate is a CEP Major and Business Administration minor. Raised in the Bay Area, CA, and now finishing her education as a senior at UW. Within the major, she focuses her studies on Sustainable, Community-centered urban development. Both at UW and beyond, she has experience with urban planning research, community engagement, and collaborative project work.



Elyse Gutierrez, *she/her*

Elyse is a senior at the University of Washington, majoring in CEP and minoring in Business Administration and Real Estate. She currently leads the alumni relations committee for her major. Elyse is passionate about sustainability, harm reduction, and creating meaningful community connections. Her long-term goal is to minimize the environmental impact of large-scale events and pursue a career in sustainability leadership.



Mira Malden, *she/her*

Mira is a senior at UW, majoring in CEP with a minor in Urban Design and Planning. As a lifelong resident of the Puget Sound, she is dedicated to creating equitable, sustainable, and accessible spaces unique to the region's diverse neighborhoods and needs. Mira has supported planning and research projects at the county and regional levels, gaining experience with community engagement, public policy, and transit-oriented development.



Ava Wright, *she/her*

Ava is a senior in the CEP program, minoring in Urban Ecological Design. Born in Colorado, Ava carries community-centered values to guide her work in her undergrad. Utilizing studio experience, she excels in working in hands-on environments that are mutually beneficial to the community and her learning. Ava is passionate about sustainable public spaces and sustainable tourism and travel.

Executive Summary

This engagement report provides socioeconomic, historical, and demographic context for the incorporated place of South Hill, Washington, United States. Detailing current considerations regarding incorporation and community engagement, the report provides recommendations for public meetings, strategies for community outreach, and an in-depth analysis of identified potential barriers to successful engagement.

Introduction

History of South Hill

Located in what is now known as Pierce County, the lands of South Hill have been called home since time immemorial by the Nisqually, Puyallup, Muckleshoot, and Squaxin Island Tribes (Pierce County). The Ancient Klickitat Trail connected Eastern Washington with the Puget Sound for hundreds of years, serving as a corridor for inter-tribal trading, and later as the primary route for the earliest White settlers, playing an essential role in the early development of South Hill (South Hill Historical Society). By the mid-1800s, the still largely forested community had a few homesteads with settlers working in logging and agriculture (primarily hops), and with newly built railroads in Tacoma and the extended community, farmers had access to a regional and world market for their products.

Through the 1950s, South Hill stayed rural with residence and economy continuing to be largely tied to farms and timber lots, and the foundations of infrastructure began development. Meridian Avenue East, a major road for historical and present South Hill activity, served as a road primarily for farmer transportation. With its completion came the connection of urban centers east and west, jump-starting South Hill's boom into suburbia at an exceeding growth rate of about 3.5 percent per year (Vest, C.). Through the 1990s, large tracts of land were developed into residential and commercial developments.

Today, South Hill is a suburban and rural area comprising mostly single-family homes. As of 2023, South Hill's overall residential parcels are 54.7% of the total Land use. As of June 2025, changes have been made to the zoning and land use Ordinances in South Hill, allowing for things like duplexes, triplexes, etc. These zoning changes allow for 250,000 possible new housing units. Then, looking at their commercial zones in comparison, 3.7% of the total Land use is Commercial. Most of the commercial development is located right through the middle of the South Hill on Meridian Avenue

Project Background

South Hill is an unincorporated area of Pierce County, Washington. *Unincorporation* refers to an area that is not considered to be a municipality of its own jurisdiction and therefore acts as a part of a larger municipality. Without a local government or elected officials at the town level, services and governance for South Hill are provided by the Pierce County government, leaving residents with limited local control. The debate over the process of incorporation is a constantly evolving discussion across the community. Within Pierce

County, the process of incorporation often begins with the respective community aligning its goals and visions for the future development of the area. If the shared community vision understands incorporation as the goal, a petition for incorporation can then be created. Per RCW 35.02.020, “A petition for incorporation must be signed by registered voters resident within the limits of the proposed city or town equal in number to at least ten percent of the number of voters residing within the proposed city or town” (Washington State Legislature, 1994).

Municipal incorporation is a contentious aspect of planning because it is an intersection between the democracy of a people, the land use, community identity, and racial justice. Many residents only encounter the issue on a ballot or an infrequent boundary proposal. Incorporation is often framed to be a clear-cut concept of “local control” of a place. However, research shows it is a multilayered and complex concept. Through clearer governance structures, more streamlined delivery of necessary services, and more direct control of zoning, taxes, and planning, municipal places are able to self-govern for their own needs. For a community like South Hill that lacks the traditional centralized representation of the community, the process of incorporation can be extremely empowering for average residents and elected or appointed officials.

Despite this, the challenges tied to incorporation are equally important to acknowledge—most notably, the process has a long history of facilitating intentional racial and economic exclusion, allowing wealthier and/or predominantly-white communities to limit racial diversity, avoid annexation, and isolate themselves from broader regional

responsibilities. These dynamics are not always intentional, but the structures of incorporation can still reproduce inequities if not carefully examined. Understanding both the benefits and the risks is extremely crucial for communities trying to make informed decisions about their future.

Purpose and Audience

This report serves as an actionable recommendation plan for the Pierce County Long Range Planning Team for early-stage engagement for the incorporated place of South Hill in Pierce County, Washington. Despite the absence of traditional centralized community organizations or leaders, meaningful engagement can still be had, especially with overlooked or less visible pockets in the community. Three tenets guiding the engagement recommendations include:

1. Identifying underrepresented demographics
2. Enlisting the best strategies in the scope of work and facilitation
3. Utilizing diverse methods of outreach

With that, the project's overall objectives are to understand how to navigate community engagement in the absence of distinct community groups. Our team worked to evaluate engagement practices and identify individuals who lack representation in current initiatives.

Methodology

To create well-informed recommendations for Pierce County, our team:

1. Facilitated regular stakeholder meetings
2. Conducted an in-depth site visit
3. Reviewed key literature surrounding topic-area research
4. Analyzed case studies of incorporation
5. Evaluated engagement plans

Findings

Stakeholder Meetings

Through meetings with the Pierce County Long Range Planning team and the South Hill Advisory Committee, we ensured our research was grounded in current community needs and context. Key takeaways include:

- Alon Bassock, Long Range Planning Manager at Pierce County, has conducted 50 community interviews with South Hill residents about incorporation. From this, the team identified general interest in becoming a city for two main reasons: **to grow into a larger city** and to **stop new zoning that prioritizes single-family homes**.
- An attempt to incorporate failed in the 90s to turn the city into “South View.”

- There are two main methods of incorporation, each requiring **signatures of 10% of either residents or property owners**.
- Lack of formal community leadership is a **barrier to thoroughly understanding local perspectives** on incorporation.
- People initially moved to South Hill for **cheap land and transportation access**. This is **no longer representative** of the current state of South Hill, as the city is incredibly car-centered and is no longer as cheap relative to Seattle or Tacoma.
- **Public safety** and **transportation** are the main community concerns.

From these findings, we conclude that community engagement is a key process in addressing community desires for improved public safety and transportation needs, while also grappling with growth management and land use/zoning improvements.

Site Visit

Our team conducted a site visit to South Hill, travelling by both car and foot, focusing on key areas gathered from our stakeholder meetings, including the master planned community Sunrise Community Living, Front Hill Park, pocket parks, transit centers and stops, and two community centers. Key takeaways include:

Residential development

- Frequent signage for new home sales.
- Large amounts of land for mixed-use and residential development.
- Large number of residential communities (gated and non-gated).

- Wide age demographic: Senior housing to early childhood education.

YMCA and Community Centers

- Has a very active and large facility that serves as a community hub.
- Full of people using the space for local sports, gyms, or community events.

South Hill Library serves as a community hub

- Community events appear to be popular.
- South Hill Book Club, Teen Council.
- Potential for a public meeting location.

Literature Review & Topic-Area Research

Our goal was to identify relevant literature and high-level frameworks to guide our planning and development process. To achieve this, we highlighted three topic areas most vital to our project:

1. Effective Public Meetings
2. Community Engagement Frameworks
3. Benefits and Challenges of Incorporation

Our team examined various meeting genres, including corporate, public, and governmental perspectives, to synthesize applicable information. For public meetings, research focused on best practices for agenda setting, facilitating inclusive dialogue among diverse stakeholders, managing conflict, and translating discussion into actionable next steps. To ensure our community engagement framework is grounded in equitable practices and informed by peer-reviewed research, we focused on iterative community engagement

processes in varying neighborhoods, with considerations of the local social, economic, and cultural environments, all with the intent of receiving and organizing community feedback.

Key pieces of literature include:

“Planning and Leading Effective Meetings. Behavior Analysis in Practice” by Linda A.

LeBlanc and Melissa R. Nosik:

This article takes five previously established design characteristics that impact the perception of a meeting as “good” or “bad” and develops them into tangible, digestible steps leaders can take in many types of meetings. The writing addresses meetings through a traditional corporation lens, serving as a potential bias, yet the findings can be adapted to any productive meeting flow. Specifically, the appendices include: 1) Meeting planning, leading, and evaluation checklist, 2) Meeting Agenda and Notes Template, and 3) Rules for Meeting Participation. These items are presented in template style, so they can be printed or adapted to fit any meeting, regardless of purpose, frequency, scope, etc. This makes the documents an extremely valuable source, as the planning process can use these professionally developed documents to guide and initiate the preparation and post-evaluation process.

“Public Participation Guide: Public Meetings” by the U.S. Environmental Protection

Agency:

This source offers a comprehensive guide covering meeting execution, necessary resources, potential challenges, and overarching guidelines. It includes sub-sections with

situational assessments, tools, and resources for implementation and facilitation.

Published by the United States Environmental Protection Agency, the accreditation of this source is noted.

“Community Engagement Framework for Community Assessment and Improvement Planning” by Lillian Smith:

The article’s primary purpose is to present the Community Engagement Framework as a means of addressing public health needs and combating the challenges of unstable community-based government programs, community fatigue, and inefficient assessment plans. The framework is directed towards community stakeholders and public health agencies. Through examples of public health initiatives in South Carolina, the author identifies issues with assessment models such as MAPP, including inefficiency and disconnect from community values, and, rather, proposes an engagement-centered process with five pillars: Organize, Assess, Prioritize & Align, Act, and Evaluate. The model emphasizes communication at every stage and adaptability and nonlinearity through its iterative process. The iterative and continuous communication and engagement are vital to fully representing the community of South Hill.

“Negotiating Places of Incorporation: Comparing the Practices of Community Development Organisations in Immigration and Incorporation” by Sheryl-Ann Simpson:

This article researches how community development organizations negotiate immigration and incorporation in different places by comparing cases in Winnipeg, Providence, and Copenhagen. Using two frameworks, which are based on incorporation and relational

urban comparison, it is discovered that state resources and state-backed narratives significantly shape how organizations structure their work. Organizations with the most resources are often the least accountable to residents; meanwhile, those closely connected with immigrant communities have fewer opportunities to influence the state. The article argues for stronger organizational democracy, better inclusion of immigrants' cultural skills, and more direct engagement with immigrant residents.

Case Studies

We examined three case studies to identify instances of community engagement strategies and needs that led to successful incorporation.

1. **Central, Louisiana:** With a population of 28,000 people, Central incorporated in 2005 due to residents pushing for a new school system and more control over local government services and taxation. They used 2% sales that the municipality is already paying for services, as well as managing city costs and staffing. They created a public-private partnership to cater to city services by contracting with a non-profit called IBTS. As a result, IBTS employees can work longer shifts for shorter hours, not economically driven but service-driven, creating jobs with overlapping tasks to allow for flexibility
2. **Sandy Springs, Georgia:** For 40 years, residents pushed for local control of government services before incorporation in 2005. They utilized a private contractor from 2005 - 2010 for most city services while maintaining local governance. Since then, Sandy Springs evolved to their P3 model (public-private partnership), awarding

multiple service contracts to fulfill Finance, IT, Community Development and Communications, Municipal Court, Parks and Recreation, and Public Works needs. As a result, the city generated ongoing operating savings and budget surpluses, allowing for capital investment without major tax increases and improved service efficiency and responsiveness through streamlined contracting.

3. **Jurupa Valley, California:** Due to a strong desire for enhanced police services and local control over planning and zoning issues, Jurupa Valley incorporated in 2011. Residents garnered support through the utilization of a distinct civic identity (through agricultural roots and frequent local events), building upon longstanding connections in the local economy and schools, and identifying shared concern for rapid development and active participation in local committees. They adopted a contract city model, using the Riverside County Sheriff's Department for policing and contracting for public works and administrative services to reduce startup costs. The city maintained community engagement beyond incorporation through committees and initiatives like "Healthy Jurupa Valley."

Engagement Plan Evaluation

To gain insight and understanding of frameworks for current engagement plans, we turned to the following examples:

"Report for Public Health – Seattle & King County's Strategic Planning Efforts" Prepared by: Anthony Campbell, PhD George Zeno Nakia Winfield, LMSW

The engagement report outlines engagement methods, findings, and recommendations to inform further strategic planning processes. Engagement approaches include:

1. Listening Sessions (in person and virtual/Zoom)
2. Surveys
3. Interviews (one-on-one and small group).

These strategies focused on antiracist frameworks and decolonialized orientations, guided by seven objectives to define impactful engagement, which involve bringing in diverse perspectives, especially from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color; creating safe, authentic spaces for dialogue; accommodating different communication needs; offering multiple ways to participate; and strengthening shared understanding of PHSKC's planning processes and community efforts. For the full list, refer to Appendix B.

Furthermore, they cite the guidance of the following approaches – People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (PISAB) Antiracism Principles, Liberating Structures, Elizabeth Carlson's Eight Principles of Anti-Colonial Research Methodology for Settlers, as well as embodied practices.

Lastly, the report identifies six common historic failures of community engagement that have resulted in harm, disengagement, and are often fueled by White Supremacy Culture:

Historic Misuse of Data	Lack of Community Benefit	Lack of Ownership & Access
Privacy & Security Concerns	Lack of Action	Lack of Seats at the Table

*Phase One Community Engagement Report: Overview of Community Engagement for
MIDD Renewal*

Prepared by: King County Department of Community and Human Services

In this report, the Mental Illness and Drug Dependency (MIDD) renewal planning team outlines the methods in Phase One of the community engagement campaign, which informed a renewal report and future planning. 929 individuals were engaged through four strategies:

1. In-person listening sessions
2. Community-based events (Peer-driven)
3. Virtual listening sessions
4. Online surveys

Through these methods, the team gathered qualitative and quantitative data to inform behavioral health, needs, gaps, and opportunities. To ensure accessibility, the methods had varying access points and target audiences, from the general public to behavioral health providers to community-based organizations to those who were unable to attend live listening sessions. 20 translations and culturally-based events were also a key point of accessibility. In the thematic analysis of findings, the team distilled data into subthemes of “What is Working” and “What Needs Improvement.”

Recommendations

Public Meeting Strategies

Workplace Visits

Workplace visits allow for meeting people where they are at and establishing a physical presence in the community. If there are specific target demographics to be met with, establishing a relationship with a representative as a point of contact is vital to understanding any necessary context–this is elaborated on in the following sub-section ‘Outreach Strategies’. Methods to be implemented include:

- Digital or printed mail-in feedback or surveys, to prevent unnecessary time consumption
- Facilitated Q&A sessions with experts, with the option to collaborate with an Advisory Board
- Dot Voting, where individuals can indicate their primary concerns with incorporation or other issue areas by placing a “dot”
- Story Collection, where individuals can describe their transportation issues, tax concerns, etc., as a means to highlight lived experiences rather than focusing on critiques

Housing Associations

Housing Associations have a well-established presence across South Hill due to the number of large, master planned communities. The following Housing Associations would serve as considerable platforms for hosting public meetings:

Pierce County Housing Authority

- Has an established Board of Commissioners
- Commission meets monthly–great opportunity for holding engagement events
- Receives local, state, and federal funding
- Many established partnerships with local organizations–Metropolitan Development Council and YWCA

Viking Estates

- Mobile home park in eastern South Hill
- 55+ community members who would likely benefit from city services, with strong opinions

Sunrise Community Living

- Master planned community in southeastern South Hill
- Currently developing a Sunrise Community Center–great place to hold community events

Outreach Strategies

Social Media

A primary goal of outreach is to reach the highest number of individuals from the most diverse groups. Social Media is an effective tool for community outreach and communication by many local governments in Washington. According to the US Census, the median age of residents in South Hill is about 35.5 years old, and 61% of the population is between 18-64. In 2025, Facebook is one of the most commonly used social media platforms for people aged 30+, while Instagram is one of the most used social media platforms from ages 18-29. Flyers, polls, and announcements can be posted on these platforms to reach wider audiences. Pierce County and Pierce County Parks and Recreation already have a sizable following on Instagram, and residents of South Hill are likely to be among the people who follow the accounts.

However, a major gap in social media presence is the lack of South Hill-specific accounts, which should be considered for more localized engagement with the community.

Establishing an online presence also provides an accessible way for people to be informed about what is happening in the community they reside in, with even more options for cross-posting and sharing. Facebook is another key platform with established online groups already discussing South Hill-specific issues. Groups on Facebook to consider include South Hill, Concerned South Hill, Sunrise Village, Everything Puyallup, and Pierce County. Additionally, partnering with prominent local businesses on platforms they have a

significant following on is an effective way to have greater visibility and reach with an online audience.

Workplace & HOA

Specific considerations should be taken for conducting outreach to workplaces and HOAs. Once specific organizations have been identified as possible places for successful meetings to take place, a core step is establishing a representative for the designated organization. These representatives are pivotal for gauging interest, building trust, and bridging the gap between professionals in the field and members of the community. Over time, these representatives will hopefully fulfill the role of Community Liaisons, and can then take the lead on holding meetings with the public, one-on-one conversations, and reporting back (with guidance from Pierce County). Methods of initial contact may include emailing or in-person visits.

Assessment of Access & Barriers

Workplace/Housing Association Visits

These meeting strategies can inherently create more access in the way of meeting people where they are. There is more access to be involved for many who wouldn't typically join in on the conversation. Common work hours for South Hill residents were identified as typical 9-5 hours. Visiting people during work hours takes away that barrier of time for many

individuals. As well, many residents lack reliable transportation, which is not needed for this meeting strategy. One barrier with workplace visits is the percentage of actual South Hill residents versus those who live elsewhere. A consideration is the limited access of these meetings, as they are restrictive of who can attend, and result in participants with low diversity of lifestyles.

Listening Sessions

These types of meetings are more accessible to all, due to their open nature. This creates more opportunities for more diverse voices to be heard and in conversation with one another. Listening sessions are also open conversations that promote more opinions and conversations. This strategy doesn't require much background knowledge for participants, making it more accessible than others. Additionally, the option to run virtually can be an accommodation for those with transportation issues as well. But virtual meetings have the potential to create less engagement than in-person meetings.

Additional Considerations

- People not having capacity or interest, especially those who are less active in planning-related activities, or rather, have a desire to address shorter-term impacts like immediate or general needs.
- Public desire for projects outside the scope of work for the Pierce County Planning & Public Works department

- Ability for Pierce County to build trust with communities that are traditionally marginalized or excluded from planning processes.

Next Steps

Per our team's recommendations, the next steps focus on building community trust through local partnerships and point of contact with businesses and HOAs. Establishing community liaisons, hosting workplace visits that integrate public meeting methods, and hosting a series of listening sessions are suggested points of outreach. In these processes, it is imperative to acknowledge barriers such as work schedules and a lack of public transport through providing in-person and virtual options and hosting meetings in neutral and accessible locations, such as community centers and the South Hill Library.

Engagement should follow an iterative, equity-focused approach that actively identifies who is being reached and who may remain underrepresented, with clear communication of how community input is being used.

To support these efforts, developing a dedicated online presence for South Hill engagement will expand access to information, build trust, and strengthen visibility across multiple platforms. Maintaining a consistent physical and digital presence will be essential to fostering long-term community trust, unity, and continued involvement in the incorporation conversation.

Conclusion

This report of community engagement recommendations for South Hill, Washington, serves to identify target demographics or businesses and balance underrepresented and engaged groups, provide suggestions for iterative public meetings to collect feedback and improve current processes, utilize outreach for engagement and education, and prioritize ease of access to participation. By providing ways to get started on engagement, this report furthers the end goal of building a sense of community in South Hill and facilitates direct involvement in community-wide issues and initiatives.

Appendices

Appendix A: Proposed Stakeholder List

General Audiences and Groups	Levels of Participation	Engagement Strategies
Broader public	Inform, involve, consult, collaborate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public engagement platform • Community-wide engagement, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Virtual and in-person events ◦ Social media ◦ Email updates ◦ Surveys ◦ Mailer, postering, and flyering ◦ Intercept surveys • Neighborhood Group-led engagement, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Focus groups and meetings ◦ Social media outreach ◦ One-on-one conversations ◦ Surveys ◦ Location based outreach at: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Community festivals or gatherings ■ Regularly occurring meetings or groups ■ Third place outreach (at existing community gathering places)
BIPOC communities and businesses	Inform, involve, consult, collaborate	
Young and elderly people	Inform, involve, consult, collaborate	
Immigrants, and refugees	Inform, involve, consult, collaborate	
Neighborhood groups, workplaces, HOAs, etc.	Inform, involve, consult, collaborate	
Media, including multi-cultural media	Inform, involve, consult, collaborate	
County-wide stakeholders and groups	Inform, involve, consult, collaborate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public engagement platform • Briefings • Workshop(s) advocates and public • Virtual and in-person events • Surveys
Advocacy organizations	Inform, involve, consult, collaborate	
Local Advisory Boards and Commissions	Inform, involve, consult, collaborate	

Appendix B: Seven Objectives of Responsible and Impactful Engagement

“Report for Public Health – Seattle & King County’s Strategic Planning Efforts” Prepared by:
Anthony Campbell, PhD George Zeno Nakia Winfield, LMSW

1. Include diverse perspectives through strategic engagement with PHSKC’s full constellation of community collaborators – staff, community-based organizations, and public health partners.
2. Deepen understanding of the needs of PHSKC’s communities, partner organizations, and staff, with a particular focus on those who are Black, Indigenous and People of Color, to inform the development of PHSKC’s mission, goals, functions, and any future implementation plans.
3. Provide clarity of purpose and transparency throughout all phases of the engagement process, modeling accountability and creating the conditions for authentic engagement.
4. Promote conversational dynamics that support collaborators arriving and participating as their whole selves in safe and brave spaces where disagreement and common ground are both equally valued.
5. Ensure that collaborators can participate in a manner that respects their preferences for communicating ideas and perspectives, such as through storytelling, as well as providing any language translation, interpretation services or accommodations needed.
6. Provide diverse ways for collaborators to engage, including, but not limited to, interactive engagement formats, web-based meetings, and other formats that respect the assorted needs and orientations of the PHSKC community.
7. Strengthen understanding of PHSKC planning processes and ongoing efforts across the community – staff, public health partners, and community organizations.

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