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Everything Counts in Memphis: Community Engagement for Data-Driven Planning

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Planning has a "we said/they said" problem. Residents show up to meetings, share what matters, and leave, hoping their voices count. Planners take notes, write reports, and move forward with plans. Then, years later, communities ask: "What happened to what we said? We said we wanted this, not that." And planners have no answer, no documentation, no proof—just vague memories and filed-away sticky notes.

But what if things were different? What if planners treated community feedback like the data it is: trackable, quantifiable, and traceable from the meeting where residents said it, through the drafts where it was considered, to the policy where it appears (or doesn't)? This wouldn't just be better engagement. This would be engagement planners can prove was meaningful.

The Memphis Division of Planning and Development had an opportunity to test this hypothesis when we began community engagement efforts for the update to our comprehensive plan, *Memphis 3.0,* in 2024. Staff developed a new framework to collect, analyze, and use community feedback. The Memphis Engagement Framework is built around three key elements:

- First, we used abductive and inductive reasoning to interpret community voice with fairness and precision, reasoning from what people said to what they likely meant, without inserting our own assumptions.
- Second, we applied "Memphis Math" using quantitative tools to normalize input across neighborhoods of different sizes and identify genuine citywide priorities rather than just the loudest voices.
- Third, we built accountability through a traceable system that creates "receipts," showing residents exactly what happened to their input at every stage of the planning process.

This *PAS Memo* documents how the Memphis Engagement Framework works, why it works, and how to adapt it to your city. If you're tired of performing engagement instead of proving it, this article offers a starting point. In the context of Arnstein's well-known ladder, this is what happens when participation gains power rather than performance.

Figure 1. Public engagement becomes truly meaningful when community input is treated like the data it is (Memphis Office of Comprehensive Planning)

The Problem Memphis Had to Solve

From 1981 to 2019, Memphis had no comprehensive plan. These were four decades of planning without a plan, of decisions without documentation, of engagement without evidence. The history here is one of systematic exclusion of BIPOC voices, urban renewal that destroyed thriving Black neighborhoods, and a legacy of planning done *to* communities rather than *with* them.

When *Memphis 3.0* launched in 2019, it represented a chance to do things differently. But by the time we began the five-year update process in 2024, we'd discovered a fundamental problem in how we were doing community engagement.

Figure 2. The Memphis 3.0 comprehensive plan update offered an opportunity to rethink the city's approach to community engagement (Memphis Office of Comprehensive Planning)

This problem went beyond Memphis's specific history—it was a problem endemic to how planning does engagement everywhere, all the time.

Here's what engagement typically looks like in practice: A planner stands in front of a room full of residents, writes their comments on sticky notes or flip charts, takes photos for the report, and then... what? Those notes go in a file. Maybe they get mentioned in a summary. Maybe someone reads them. But there's no system for tracking what happened to them, no proof that they shaped anything, and no way to show residents that their time mattered.

When we returned to the communities years later for the *Memphis 3.0* five-year update, residents would say, "We told you this before!" But we, the planners, had no documentation. They'd say, "You never listened!" And we couldn't prove otherwise. We were stuck in an endless loop of "we said/they said," with zero accountability on either side.

Why This Matters

Again, this problem isn't unique to Memphis; it's how most planning engagement works across the country. Community input is treated as anecdotal rather than analytical, something to acknowledge rather than measure. Feedback is summarized in broad narrative paragraphs that lose specificity and attribution, making it impossible to connect individual comments to their sources or to their influence on decisions.

There's no structured way to track themes across multiple meetings or geographies, so a concern raised in five different neighborhoods might never register as a citywide priority. Documentation tends to focus on process metrics—how many meetings were held, who attended, what methods were used—rather than on influence metrics that capture what actually changed because of residents' input.

By the time plans are adopted, there's still no consistent way to see which community priorities made it into policy and which didn't, leaving both residents and planners unable to demonstrate accountability. The result? Communities stop showing up because they can't see their impact, and planners burn out trying to do meaningful work in systems that don't measure meaning.

Why Don't Planners Measure Engagement Impact?

Most engagement measurement stops at process evaluation (how many people showed up?) instead of outcome evaluation (what changed because they did?). There are several reasons why.

First, causality is messy. Policy decisions have too many variables (politics, funding, leadership changes, timing) for any one input to claim sole credit, making it nearly impossible to trace a direct empirical line from "the community said this" to "the policy changed because of that."

Second, engagement data isn't built for analysis. Most public feedback lives in sticky notes, comment cards, or meeting transcripts. It is qualitative, decentralized, and inconsistently coded. Without a structured method to tag, track, and trace community input across drafts and decisions, the connection between participation and policy breaks down.

Third, no one demands it. Reporting stops at participation metrics (attendance counts, demographics, satisfaction surveys) because that's what grants and council updates ask for. There's no standard that says, "Document here what changed because of engagement."

Fourth, it's hard to measure impact within large organizations, such as city governments. Showing exactly when and how community input shaped a decision takes time and transparency, and both can feel tricky in places that value consensus.

And finally, the field still doesn't have shared indicators. The health sector can point to disease diagnoses and intervention outcomes. Educators can point to test scores. Planning doesn't yet have an agreed-upon way to measure "influence," so most agencies don't even try.

The Memphis Engagement Framework was built to close that gap. It doesn't solve the attribution question entirely, but it makes the path of influence visible, structured, and verifiable.

The Solution We Built

When *Memphis 3.0*'s five-year update began, planning staff had supportive leadership willing to try something different: not just better engagement, but engagement we could prove was meaningful.

We decided to treat community feedback like the data it is. We applied logic and simple math to create a system that could:

- Track a resident's comment from a meeting all the way to policy
- Quantify themes fairly across neighborhoods of different sizes
- Prove which community priorities influenced decisions
- Show residents exactly what happened to their input
- Build institutional memory, so future projects start with history rather than amnesia

We call this the Memphis Engagement Framework. With it, we are finally achieving what Sherry Arnstein asked for back in 1969: participation that redistributes power, not pretends to provide it.

The Memphis Engagement Framework

The Memphis Engagement Framework has three core components that work together to make community input traceable and verifiable.

- The first is *philosophical*: it applies specific types of reasoning to interpret what communities say without imposing planner assumptions.
- The second is *operational*: it uses consistent data collection methods (safe, comfortable, and meaningful engagement) to ensure the quality of input we're measuring.
- The third is *quantitative*: it employs three mathematical tools—District Mention Rate, Interdistrict Comparison, and Citywide Theme Scoring—to normalize input across neighborhoods and identify genuine citywide priorities.

Together, these components transform engagement from a process we document to outcomes we can prove.

The Logic

Most planners don't think about logic when they're facilitating meetings, but they should. How we think about data fundamentally shapes what we do with it and whether communities ever see their voices reflected in outcomes. The reasoning method we choose is a statement about power: Who gets to define what counts as knowledge? Whose interpretations matter? How is meaning made from what people say?

The Memphis Engagement Framework uses abductive and inductive reasoning because these methods center community voice and allow meaning to emerge from what people actually say, rather than what planners expect them to say.

Abductive reasoning infers the most likely explanation for a pattern. This is detective work: the logic of diagnosis and interpretation, where you see clues and ask, "What's the best explanation for what I'm seeing?"

In the Memphis Engagement Framework, we use abductive reasoning to identify themes within a specific context: a single meeting, a neighborhood, or a district. For example, within the Core City District during *Memphis 3.0*, residents said, "We need more trees and shade," "It's too hot to walk anywhere," "Can we get a tree canopy program?" and "Shade structures at bus stops." Abduction tells us this isn't four different themes; it's one shared concern about urban heat and walkability infrastructure. This is how we make sense of what people care about, deciding which repeated ideas are meaningful and interpreting intent within context.

Inductive reasoning builds general conclusions from specific observations. The more examples that support a pattern, the stronger the conclusion becomes.

Once we've identified themes through abductive interpretation within each district, we use inductive reasoning to look for patterns across districts by counting how many districts mentioned a theme, how often, and how consistently. For example, when we see "safer sidewalks" mentioned across 12 of 14 districts, we're concluding that this is a citywide pedestrian safety issue rather than a neighborhood-specific complaint. The final scoring model is itself an inductive generalization: based on the data collected, it tells us which themes deserve to be treated as citywide priorities.

In contrast, typical planning engagement analysis uses **deductive reasoning**, which starts with conclusions and hunts for proof. This is backwards for community engagement. Deductive tools like dot-voting and rating scales can work when seeking feedback on specific options, validating technical details, or testing community-generated ideas. As primary engagement methods, however, they're problematic.

If a planner walks into a meeting thinking, "We need to confirm support for bike lanes," they've already decided the answer. Community input becomes confirmation bias with extra steps. The problem isn't the tool itself; it's using these tools as if they're discovering community priorities when they're really just measuring responses to planner-generated ideas.

The Lineage

To create the Memphis Engagement Framework, we didn't invent a new engagement theory; we operationalized what planners already know.

For over 50 years, planning theorists have been building the case for exactly what this framework does. Sherry Arnstein (1969) warned us that participation without power redistribution is an empty ritual, building her ladder and telling us to climb it. John Forester (2009, 2013) showed us that listening is moral work, that preparation and pre-meetings often determine the quality of what happens in the room, and that planners design conditions for dialogue rather than outcomes. Bent Flyvbjerg (1998, 2001) demanded we ask, "Who gains and who loses?", insisting that power defines what counts as rational and that planning must be grounded in values rather than detached rationality. Judith Innes (1995) with David Booher (2010) proved that knowledge is co-created through communicative action, that what counts as fact emerges through dialogue. Patsy Healey (1992, 1999) argued that collaborative planning must be embedded in institutional routines to endure, teaching us that institutions learn through dialogue and reflection.

Together, these theorists asked the question: "Are we listening?" The Memphis Engagement Framework asks the next question: "How do we prove that listening changes what we do?" We took their moral imperatives and built a measurement infrastructure, making engagement traceable, quantifiable, and returnable to the people who created it.

Why This Matters

Why is this kind of approach to public engagement so important? There are two main reasons.

First, it proves you listened. The Memphis Engagement Framework doesn't just claim "we had meetings" or "we collected input." It provides proof with evidence, with receipts. When a resident asks, "What happened to what I said?" you can show them. When Council asks, "What does the community want?" you can quantify it. When a new administration takes over, the data survives. The framework builds a durable record of

community voice that outlives individual projects, leadership changes, and political cycles.

Second, it systematically builds trust and equity. Healey argued that institutions learn through dialogue, and the Memphis Engagement Framework ensures they do. Not through good intentions or one heroic planner, but through consistent, transparent, and accountable systems that make listening a collective practice instead of an individual virtue.

Trust is not built once; it's built in small, ordinary moments of returning to communities, showing your work, admitting when input couldn't be used, and explaining why. The framework provides the scaffolding for those moments to occur consistently. It operationalizes empathy. Equity is not an outcome; it's a habit. When every district's input is tracked, normalized, and reported back, the city learns to see its residents evenly. That's what systematic trust looks like: not promises, but patterns.

Data Collection That Actually Works

Our data collection is built on three interdependent tiers of engagement: safety, comfort, and meaning (Figure 3). These are community-experienced outcomes that determine whether residents will show up, speak honestly, and trust that their input matters. From the resident's perspective, each tier answers a fundamental question:

- Safety asks, "Can I show up here?"
- Comfort asks, "Can I speak up here?"
- Meaning asks, "Does what I say here matter?"

These are not phases that happen once and end; they are cumulative conditions that build on each other like a pyramid, where each level supports what comes next. You cannot get people to show up without safety, you cannot get honest input without comfort, and you cannot prove accountability without meaning. Together, these three tiers form the foundation for data collection that centers community experience rather than planner convenience, ensuring engagement is authentic, ethical, and accountable from the resident's perspective.

Figure 3. The Memphis Engagement Framework is built on three interdependent tiers of safety, comfort, and meaning

Pre-Meeting: Building Safety

Safety is a feeling, and it's the foundation of all authentic engagement. It begins long before a single sticky note hits the wall. In Memphis, safety is treated as institutional responsibility rather than a community burden. We don't just announce a meeting and hope people show up; we do the work to earn our welcome through strategic partnerships, trained facilitators, and pre-conversations that establish trust before formal engagement begins.

We partner with BLDG Memphis, a community development intermediary, to distribute flyers, inform community leaders, and help set up pre-meeting engagement. This matters because of neutrality: most districts trust BLDG Memphis far more than local government, and direct government or individual planner outreach can feel either scary or biased.

We also partner with the University of Memphis, whose graduate students serve as trained facilitators and recorders at meetings. This benefits students by providing real-world practice in facilitation and recording (they go through the same training planners do—more on that in the sidebar on p. 5), and it benefits planners by providing crucial staffing—our largest meeting had 157 people, and we needed the help. It's also sustainable: the past three comprehensive planning project managers and the current division administrator all came through this program, most having worked on Memphis 3.0 in some capacity as students.

In this preparation phase, staff learn how to listen rather than lead, asking open-ended questions instead of guiding the conversation toward predetermined answers. In Memphis, we worked with Bill Lennertz from the National Charrette Institute to develop our agendas and train facilitators in documentation styles, conflict resolution, and table management (Figure 4, p. 5). When conversations derail, we use what we call a "floating parking lot": instead of dismissing off-topic conversations, a floating facilitator pulls that person aside for a one-on-one, writes a summary, and brings it back to the table, where the group decides together whether that tangent should be added to the official notes. This keeps conversations productive without silencing anyone.

Finally, we start the conversation before the meeting ever happens. On social media, we'll ask open questions like "What's happening in your neighborhood?" instead of "Come to our meeting on Tuesday at 6 p.m. to talk about the thing we already decided." We also spend time in everyday community spaces—barbershops, churches, libraries—listening first before we ever lead a discussion.

Figure 4. Memphis planners, community partners, and students were trained in facilitation by the National Charette Institute (Memphis Office of Comprehensive Planning)

During Meetings: Creating Comfort through Consistency

Safety is what gets people in the room, but comfort builds on that foundation and transforms attendance into dialogue. It's not about making everyone happy; it's about making everyone at ease enough to be honest. Comfort doesn't mean avoiding discomfort; it allows people to stay in hard conversations without shutting down.

The easiest way to create comfort is through consistency. In Memphis, we structure everything except community voice, creating methodological predictability that allows authentic input to emerge. Every district gets the same presentation format, the same activities, and the same information, with notes recorded the same way across all meetings. When people know what to expect—when they see that every neighborhood gets the same treatment and the same process—they can relax into the conversation instead of wondering if they're being manipulated or treated differently than other communities.

This data consistency holds even as our methodology evolves. For *Memphis 3.0*, our research question stayed the same, but we learned to ask better questions over time. In our first districts, we asked, "What places need to change in your neighborhood?" and got all kinds of answers that required extensive follow-up to understand what people actually wanted. By our last districts, we were asking, "Where are the places that positively or negatively influence other areas of your neighborhood?" We were getting the same information faster and more efficiently because we'd learned to ask more precise questions. We document these improvements so the data stays comparable across all districts.

Every table has a trained recorder who works as the facilitator's teammate (Figure 5, p. 6). At the beginning of each meeting, the facilitator introduces the recorder and explains: "The only things that make it back to City Hall are what's up on our board and on our maps. As a table, you have to agree with what gets written down." Recorders are trained not to write assumptions. They capture what's said, not what they think was meant, and they're accountable to the table. This transparency creates comfort by allowing residents to see and verify what's being recorded in real time.

Building Internal Training Capacity

Training staff to facilitate engagement well is infrastructure work, not a one-time event. When *Memphis 3.0*'s five-year update began, we partnered with Bill Lennertz at the National Charrette Institute to establish our foundational practices. Bill worked with us on three critical elements:

- **Agenda design:** What do we actually need to capture? Who needs to be in the room? What questions will get us honest answers rather than performative responses? This upfront work determined whether our meetings would generate useful data or just check a box.
- **Facilitation skills:** How do you listen without leading? How do you manage a table where one person dominates? How do you draw out the quiet voices without putting them on the spot? Bill trained our staff, recorders, and University of Memphis student facilitators on these core practices.
- **Documentation standards:** What gets written down? How do we ensure recorders capture what's said rather than what they think was meant? How do we make recording transparent and accountable to participants? Consistent documentation was the foundation for everything that came after.

After six months of practice using these methods, we could train new staff ourselves. NCI didn't just train individual facilitators. They helped us build a transferable system. New planners joining the team can be trained by existing staff who have real experience applying the methods, not just theoretical knowledge. This internal training capacity is what makes the framework sustainable beyond the original team.

These are the core principles we reinforce in training:

- Listen more than you talk; aim for 80/20 ratio in conversations
- Ask, "Tell me more about that?" instead of offering solutions
- DON'T LIE: Validate concerns without promising outcomes you can't deliver; "I don't know, but I'll find out" is helpful… but you actually have to find out
- Make recording visible and accountable to participants
- Treat every input as data, even (especially) the uncomfortable stuff
- Your job is to create conditions for dialogue, not control outcomes

The investment in training pays dividends: well-trained facilitators generate better data, communities trust the process more, and new staff can step into engagement work with confidence rather than anxiety.

Figure 5. Trained recorders work with facilitators to capture what's said in community meetings (Memphis Office of Comprehensive Planning)

But consistency alone isn't enough to create comfort. It's just the foundation. Comfort also requires relational work that honors how people actually communicate. We get to meetings early to talk with people lingering by the snack table, the ones who don't want to speak up in the big group, the elders who've been watching their neighborhood change for 40 years. Those conversations often give us the most honest data (pro tip: grandmas have the best intel), and we write it down. Comfort means meeting people where they are, not just where we've set up a microphone. It's the combination of consistent structure and relational attention.

Post-Meeting: Proving Meaning

Meaningful engagement is where good intentions become measurable results. It's not just about participation. It's about being able to show that participation changed something. When engagement is meaningful, you can follow community input from the moment it's shared to the moment it shows up in policy or practice. It's the accountability tier: the part where we close the loop, document outcomes, and show residents that their voices made a difference.

In Memphis, we close the loop through follow-up conversations at every stage of the process. We go back to communities and say, "Here's what we heard from your meeting and others. Did we get it right?" We invite residents to see how their input is being used in draft documents, and we make all of our notes available online so community members can track exactly how their input shaped policy. When the plan is adopted, we return to every district with a clear accounting: "Here's what you said. Here's what made it into policy. Here's what didn't and why."

Because we know our neighbors, we know exactly what tool to pull. In one district, they don't care about our scoring matrix and just want a one-page summary, while in another, they want to see everything we ever thought about. We can do both because we track everything. The point is simple: communities shouldn't have to wonder if they were heard. We should be able to show them.

Memphis Math: Three Ways to Slice Community Data

The Memphis Engagement Framework turns moral commitments into measurable systems. Safety, comfort, and meaning are not just feelings; they are conditions that shape the quality of data we collect. Once engagement is safe enough for honesty and comfortable enough for authenticity, what communities tell us becomes data: real, usable, trackable evidence of public priorities. That's where Memphis Math begins.

We measure because trust without proof is fragile, and equity demands accountability. Memphis Math exists to answer one central question: Whose voice shaped this decision? These tools don't just count input. They make patterns visible, normalize data across neighborhoods of different sizes, and ensure that quieter districts aren't drowned out by louder ones. The math is simple by design, but the discipline it creates transforms engagement from performance into evidence.

The Memphis Framework looks at community input on three levels, each answering a different question about priorities (Figure 6).

- At the district level, the analysis shows what each area actually said. This identifies the themes that matter most within each neighborhood context.
- At the interdistrict level, it compares those findings across neighborhoods, revealing which issues show up everywhere and which are unique to specific places.

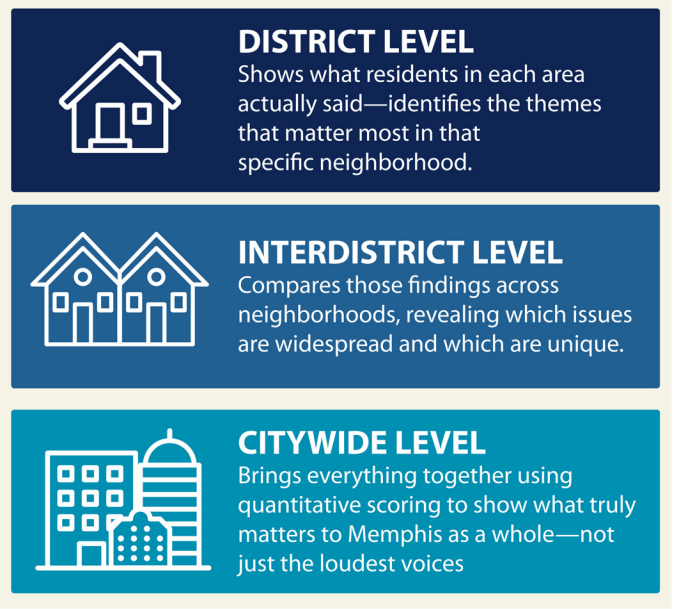


Figure 6. Memphis measures community input on three levels: district, interdistrict, and citywide (Memphis Office of Comprehensive Planning)

- At the citywide level, it brings everything together, using quantitative scoring to identify what truly matters to Memphis as a whole rather than just what the loudest voices say.

Together, these levels create a fuller picture of community voice: what people care about locally, what concerns overlap, and what rises to the top citywide.

Before we can measure anything, we have to decide what counts. In Memphis, a "mention" isn't every individual comment; it's a moment of agreement. Our meetings are built around small tables of about eight to 10 people, so our base unit isn't the number of attendees, it's the number of tables. Each table counts as one "vote" or mention for a theme. So when we say affordable housing was mentioned four times, that means four different tables of neighbors talked it through and agreed it mattered.

That distinction matters. It means we're valuing collective discussion over individual volume. When all four tables at a Jackson District workshop mentioned housing, we captured both the consensus—that housing is a priority—and the nuance in how people defined it: naturally occurring affordable housing, infill, subsidies, and infrastructure for rehab. That's the balance we're after: recognizing what people share while still showing how context shapes their priorities.

Level 1: District Mention Rate—Making Voices Comparable through Normalization

The District Mention Rate solves a fundamental equity problem: raw attendance numbers privilege large, well-attended meetings over smaller ones, making it impossible to compare what different neighborhoods actually care about.

Imagine two districts. One had 100 attendees and mentioned affordable housing eight times, while another had 10 attendees and mentioned it once. Raw counts suggest the first district cares more, but when meeting size is accounted for, the pattern reverses. The smaller district emphasized affordable housing more intensely relative to their group size. This is the core logic of normalization: raw numbers reward attendance, but normalization rewards emphasis.

The District Mention Rate divides the number of times a theme was mentioned by the number of tables (or groups) present at the meeting, creating a proportional measure that allows apples-to-apples comparison across neighborhoods of vastly different sizes. By normalizing for meeting size, we ensure that a quiet district with consistent priorities isn't drowned out by a loud district with scattered concerns. The sidebar below works through the math.

The denominator matters and should reflect how your data is structured. Memphis uses tables because each represents a small group consensus, but if your engagement uses households, focus groups, individual attendees, or survey responses, you should normalize by whatever unit best represents deliberative agreement in your context. The formula doesn't care what your denominator is; it cares that every voice, however organized, carries equitable weight.

Two safeguards keep the math honest and prevent distortion. First, *minimum mention thresholds* filter out isolated remarks: a theme must be mentioned by at least two tables (or two people, or two households—depending on your unit) to count as a district priority, ensuring that what registers as consensus reflects shared concern rather than one person's opinion. This threshold can be set transparently at the beginning of engagement, making the rules of measurement visible and agreed upon rather than applied retroactively.

Second, a *maximum mentions cap* prevents any theme from being counted more times than units were present. If five tables participated, no theme can receive more than five mentions. This safeguard keeps one extremely vocal community member from skewing the data and ensures accurate recording. Together, these safeguards don't silence individual voices; they distinguish between an individual concern and a collective priority, which is exactly what planning decisions need to understand.

The Math Behind District Mention Rate

Here's an example of how we calculate District Mention Rate.

The Situation:

- District A: 100 attendees (10 tables) mentioned "affordable housing" 8 times.
- District B: 10 attendees (1 table) mentioned it 1 time.

The Formula:

Number of mentions ÷ Number of tables (or your denominator) = District Mention Rate

- District A: 8 ÷ 10 = 0.8 mentions per table
- District B: 1 ÷ 1 = 1.0 mentions per table

District B emphasized it more. The difference isn't volume, it's intensity.

Real Example:

In Memphis' Westwood District community meeting, 5 tables participated.

- "Public safety" mentioned by 4 tables → 4 ÷ 5 = 0.80
- "Tree canopy" mentioned by 3 tables → 3 ÷ 5 = 0.60
- "Affordable housing" mentioned by 5 tables → 5 ÷ 5 = 1.00 (perfect consensus)

What this tells us: affordable housing was the top local priority in Westwood—every table brought it up independently.

Normalization only works when engagement is consistent across all districts: same invitations, same information sharing, same resources, same barriers removed. In Memphis, our safe, comfortable, and meaningful engagement structure gave us confidence that those who came to meetings came because they wanted to be there, not because structural advantages made it easier for some neighborhoods to participate than others. Normalization is how we make fairness mathematical, giving equal analytical footing to every neighborhood regardless of turnout, wealth, or capacity.

Level 2: Interdistrict Comparisons—Capturing Nuance in Citywide Priorities

Once we know each district's priorities through District Mention Rates, we need to ask: How do those themes compare across districts? Interdistrict comparison reveals not just where themes overlap, but how they overlap, distinguishing between genuine citywide consensus and shared vocabulary that masks different local concerns.

At this stage, we map each normalized theme across all districts—where it showed up, how strongly it was emphasized, and, most importantly, what people actually said about it. That's where the data start to take on meaning. Context turns information into something we can act on.

Take "code enforcement," for example. When we mapped it across Memphis, it showed up in 13 out of 14 districts. On paper, that kind of reach looks like a clear citywide priority. But when we examined what people actually said, the pattern became more nuanced: eight districts talked about illegal dumping, four districts focused on reporting mechanisms and responsiveness, and one district emphasized enforcement of property maintenance standards. We weren't looking at a vague mandate to "improve code enforcement"—we were looking at a specific need for proactive illegal dumping remediation that defined the citywide action, with four districts having a different local context that mattered for district-level planning but didn't define the broader priority. The sidebar below shows what this looks like in practice.

This contextualization allows us to move from interdistrict comparison to citywide priority synthesis with confidence. By coding the context of each mention (what specifically did people say?) and clustering those contexts to identify patterns (exact language matches across districts, similar language matches across districts using different words, or divergent contexts where the same label masks unrelated concerns), we build the qualitative intelligence needed to know whether a theme with high geographic coverage actually reflects a shared priority or just shared vocabulary.

This output feeds directly into our third tool's Language Consistency variable, but more importantly, it gives planners the evidence needed to craft policies that respond to what communities care about rather than what appeared frequently

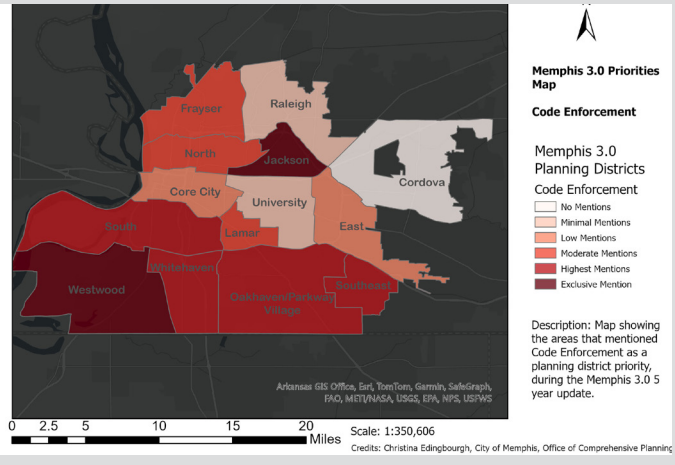
Visualizing Interdistrict Patterns: The Power of Side-by-Side Maps

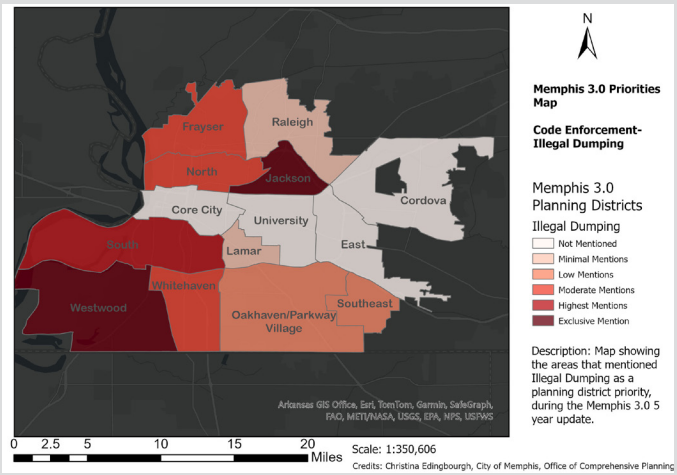
In presentations to communities and leadership, we use two maps. For the example of "code enforcement," here's what that looked like.

Map 1, Normalized Theme Distribution (Figure 7), shows "code enforcement" appearing across 13 districts with their respective District Mention Rates. It looks impressively consistent—everyone cares.

Map 2, Contextualized Theme Distribution (Figure 8), shows the same 13 districts, but color-coded by what residents actually said. Now you can see that illegal dumping clusters across the north and south of the city, while reporting issues appear in just a few specific areas.

The first map shows everyone cares; the second shows what specifically they care about.





Figures 7 and 8. Normalized theme distribution map of "code enforcement" mentions (left); Contextualized theme distribution map of "code enforcement" mentions, highlighting specific concerns (right) (Memphis Office of Comprehensive Planning)

in notes. Normalization makes voices comparable; context makes comparison meaningful.

Level 3: Citywide Theme Score—Identifying Citywide Priorities

Once we know each district's priorities and how those priorities compare across districts, we need to ask: Which themes matter citywide?

The Citywide Theme Score synthesizes three variables into one quantitative measure that identifies genuine citywide priorities rather than just the concerns of the most vocal groups. It balances geographic breadth (how many districts mentioned it), intensity (how consistently and frequently it was emphasized), and clarity (how similarly people described it), creating a composite score that rewards themes with both reach and shared meaning.

- **District Coverage** measures geographic breadth. It divides the number of districts where a theme appeared by the total number of districts, creating a score between 0 and 1 that reveals whether this is a citywide pattern or a localized concern.
- **Citywide Mention Rate** measures intensity by calculating each district's normalized mention rate, averaging those rates across all districts where the theme appeared, and then dividing by the highest average mention rate across all themes to create a comparable 0-to-1 scale. This rewards themes that were consistently emphasized across multiple neighborhoods rather than themes that had high volume in a single district.
- **Language Consistency** measures shared understanding by comparing how people described the theme across districts. Exact matches across districts (identical or near-identical phrasing) receive full credit, and similar matches across districts (same intent, different words) receive partial credit. The total is divided by the number of possible comparisons to create a score that reflects whether residents across Memphis are talking about the same thing or using the same label for different concerns.

The score weighs these factors deliberately. District Coverage receives the heaviest weight (60 percent) because if an idea appears in nearly every district, it's not just a local concern; it's a Memphis-wide concern, and all parts of Memphis matter equally in comprehensive planning. Citywide Mention Rate receives moderate weight (25 percent) because depth of engagement matters, but reach matters more. Language Consistency receives the lowest weight (15 percent) because it rewards clarity without penalizing natural variation in how people express the same underlying concern; it primarily serves as a tiebreaker when two themes have similar geographic coverage and mention rates.

The resulting score ranges from 0 to 1, with higher scores indicating stronger citywide priorities. A theme scoring above 0.75 typically reflects broad consensus with high intensity and clear shared meaning—the kind of priority that should shape

Calculating the Citywide Theme Score

In Memphis, we use the Citywide Theme Score to determine which themes are citywide priorities for inclusion in the comprehensive plan by weighting three variables: the geographic breadth of this theme (District Coverage), how often it was mentioned in each district (Citywide Mention Rate), and how each district talked about it (Language Consistency).

Here's a hypothetical example using four Memphis districts (A, B, C, and D), and three themes (affordable housing, code enforcement, and tree canopy). Table 1 shows our raw data from the four districts. We'll work through the formulas to find the Citywide Theme Score for code enforcement.

First, we calculate District Coverage. This is straightforward.

District Coverage = Number of districts where theme appeared ÷ Total districts

Code enforcement was mentioned in 4 of 4 districts, so 4 ÷ 4 = **1.0**.

Next, we calculate Citywide Mention Rate. This is a little more involved. Here are the steps:

- Calculate each district's mention rate (mentions ÷ tables)
- Average all district mention rates for that theme
- Identify which theme has the highest average mention rate across all your data
- Divide by the max mention rate across all themes

Table 1. Raw data on theme mentions in hypothetical districts A, B, C, and D.

Theme	District A (4 tables)	District B (5 tables)	District C (3 tables)	District D (6 tables)
Affordable housing	3 mentions	4 mentions	3 mentions	2 mentions
Code enforcement	4 mentions	5 mentions	2 mentions	4 mentions
Tree canopy	2 mentions	3 mentions	1 mention	0 mentions

Table 2. District Mention Rates (number of mentions ÷ number of tables from Table 1)

Theme	District A	District B	District C	District D	Average District Mention Rate
Affordable housing	0.75	0.80	1.00	0.33	0.72
Code enforcement	1.00	1.00	0.67	0.67	0.84 ← Highest rate in our data
Tree canopy	0.50	0.60	0.33	0	0.36

Table 2 shows each district's mention rate for the three themes and the average district mention rate for each theme.

Code enforcement's 0.84 becomes our benchmark. Now we normalize all themes against it to get our Citywide Mention Rates:

- Code enforcement: 0.84 ÷ 0.84 = **1.00** (the top scorer)
- Affordable housing: 0.72 ÷ 0.84 = 0.85 (also high priority)
- Tree canopy: 0.36 ÷ 0.84 = 0.36 (low priority)

(Practical note: While you're still collecting data across districts, you can use the theoretical maximum of 1.0 as a placeholder benchmark. Once all district engagement is complete and you have the full dataset, recalculate using the actual highest-performing theme as your benchmark. This ensures your final scores reflect what your community actually emphasized rather than a theoretical ideal.)

Third, we calculate Language Consistency. This measures how similarly districts talk about a theme. Because our base unit is the number of districts (not individual mentions), each district can only contribute one match—the match that represents its primary intent. It's perfectly okay for a district or subtopic not to have a match; that's valuable information showing some concerns are genuinely unique to particular neighborhoods.

Focusing on our code enforcement theme, we first identify each district's primary concern within the theme, as shown in Table 3 below.

In this example, Districts A and B both had "illegal dumping" as their primary code enforcement concern, so that's two exact matches. District C's primary concern was "blight and trash," which is similar to illegal dumping as both are about neighborhood cleanliness, so that's one similar match. District D's primary concern was "response times," which doesn't match the others as it's about government efficiency, not physical blight, so that's zero matches.

Even though Districts A and C also mentioned "response times," those were tangential comments, not their primary concerns, so they don't count toward Language Consistency. This is why early-stage coding is critical—we must accurately identify what each district primarily cared about.

Language Consistency = (Exact matches × 1.0 + Similar matches × 0.5) ÷ (Total districts)

Our calculation is (2 × 1.0 + 1 × 0.5) ÷ 4 = 2.5 ÷ 4 = **0.63**

This tells us that while all four districts mentioned code enforcement, they weren't all talking about the same aspect of it.

Then we add it all up to get the Citywide Theme Score. Remember, the formula weights District Coverage at 60 percent, Citywide Mention Rate at 25 percent, and Language Consistency at 15 percent.

For code enforcement, that's (1.0 × 0.6) + (1.0 × 0.25) + (0.63 × 0.15) = **0.94**

What this tells us: Code enforcement is a high-priority theme with strong citywide consensus.

Table 3. Primary Concerns Within the Code Enforcement Theme

Code Enforcement	District A	District B	District C	District D	Exact Matches	Similar Matches
Illegal dumping	Primary concern	Primary concern	Mention	No mention	2	0
Blight and trash	No mention	No mention	Primary concern	No mention	0	1
Response times	Mention	Mention	No mention	Primary concern	0	0

citywide policy. A theme scoring between 0.50 and 0.75 suggests significant but not universal concern that may warrant targeted action in specific districts. Scores below 0.50 indicate either localized priorities that belong in district-level planning or themes with inconsistent meaning that require further clarification before becoming policy. The sidebar on p. 10 shows how we apply this formula to community input.

This scoring doesn't replace professional judgment; it informs it, giving planners quantitative evidence to support recommendations about which community priorities deserve citywide policy responses.

Making Sure We Don't Mess This Up: Quality Control

Quality control is nonnegotiable in the Memphis Engagement Framework. The quantitative tools only work if the underlying data is accurate, consistent, and validated by the communities who provided it. We use four practices to ensure the math measures what communities actually said rather than what planners assumed they meant.

- First, **consistent tagging** ensures that themes can be sorted, compared, and analyzed across districts. We use standardized theme categories across all engagement, so "affordable housing" means the same thing in every district's dataset and can be tracked through multiple meetings and drafts. Without this consistency, the data becomes fragmented and comparisons become meaningless. See the sidebar below for more on what this looks like.
- Second, **community validation** happens at every stage: after each meeting, we return to participants and ask, "Did we get that right?" before finalizing themes, ensuring our interpretation matches their intent. This isn't performative checking. It's a genuine opportunity for communities to correct misunderstandings before they become policy recommendations.
- Third, we use **independent coding** by two staff members to catch the nuances a single coder might miss. Each person codes the same data separately, and then we compare results. The differences are where the insights live. If one coder tags a comment as "affordable housing" and another calls it "housing quality," that disagreement tells us something important about what residents actually meant. Those differences aren't errors; they're part of the interpretive work that keeps community voice honest.
- Fourth, we **show our work.** When someone asks, "How did you decide this was a priority?" we can answer it directly. The formula isn't secret. The data isn't hidden. Transparency builds trust. People can see how their input was weighted, scored, and translated into recommendations, making the process something you can audit, not just take on faith.

Together, these practices ensure that Memphis Math produces trustworthy results—not because the formulas are sophisticated, but because the discipline around data collection, interpretation, and validation makes the numbers meaningful. Quality control isn't about perfection; it's about accountability to the communities whose voices we're claiming to measure. The sidebar on p. 12 offers more detail about what this process looks like.

Trackable Outcomes, Tangible Results

In Memphis, using this method, we were able to confidently say that the number one citywide priority emerging from the *Memphis 3.0* five-year update was the need for proactive code enforcement, with consensus across 13 of 14 planning districts where it was mentioned. More than half of those districts mentioned illegal dumping specifically as the biggest issue code enforcement needs to address. We confirmed this conclusion through touchback meetings in our planning districts, where we validated the exact context with communities. This provided additional clarity and direction to shape both resource allocation and policy development.

We are now using this data to advocate for support for and examination of citywide policy and regulation to move the work forward. When the city recently received funding for projects in Whitehaven and Westwood districts, for example, we were able to share the specific community priorities documented through this framework, which will directly inform how those funds are spent. The framework doesn't just identify priorities. It creates a durable record that guides resource allocation long after the initial engagement ends.

The framework's impact extends beyond *Memphis 3.0* itself. The city's Division of Housing and Community Development is now discussing using a version of our framework for its upcoming community engagement, recognizing that the methodology is repeatable and adaptable across different planning contexts. This institutional adoption demonstrates that the Memphis Engagement Framework isn't just a one-time tool for a comprehensive plan. It's a transferable system that can be applied to any planning process where accountability to community voice matters. When other city departments see the framework's value and choose to adopt it, that's proof that systematic engagement infrastructure works better than individual heroic efforts.

The framework also reveals what doesn't constitute a citywide priority, even when it's loudly advocated. Our loudest,

Figure 9. The largest community meetings often get the most attention, but the Memphis Engagement Framework ensures that input from all community meetings are given equal attention, regardless of size (Memphis Office of Comprehensive Planning)

most vocal district was adamant that historic preservation was the number one priority, and in their district, it genuinely was. But that theme appeared in only four of 14 districts with wildly different contexts: what "historic preservation" meant varied so dramatically across those four neighborhoods that it didn't reflect a shared citywide understanding or priority. Without Memphis Math, the volume and passion of one district's advocacy might have been mistaken for citywide consensus. With it, we could honor that district's priority in their local area while recognizing it didn't warrant a major citywide policy initiative. This is equity in practice: giving every district's voice equal analytical weight, not equal volume (Figure 9, p. 11).

Quality Control for Data Accountability

In Memphis, staff members ("coders") tag all the community input recorded at every engagement event: they review the meeting notes and enter three types of information in an Excel spreadsheet, as shown in Table 4:

1. Source identification: A code that indicates which table, which district, which meeting (e.g., "JH-N-A1-WS1" = Justin Harris's table, North District, Area 1, Workshop 1)
2. Keywords: Short labels that categorize the topic (e.g., "Parks," "Illegal Dumping," "Traffic Calming")
3. Notes/context: The actual community input, copied verbatim from meeting notes

Keywords are initially arbitrary labels chosen by coders. They don't have inherent meaning until they're confirmed with the community and compared across districts. The key principle: if community members are saying the same thing, it belongs in the same category.

Two coders independently tag the same meeting notes, each assigning keywords based on what they see in the community input. They then compare their tagging:

- Agreement: When both coders assign the same keyword, it's validated.
- Disagreement: When coders differ, they discuss why. These disagreements often reveal nuance: is "affordable housing" the same as "gentrification concerns"? The debate surfaces important distinctions about what residents actually meant.
- Community validation: When there's ambiguity, we go back to the community and ask: "We heard you say X. Did you mean Y or Z?" Their answer determines the final keyword. Quality control rules.

For example, as shown in Table 4, Coder 1 wrote "trains" as a keyword. But Coder 2 noted the broader concern was about blocked street access and traffic violations caused by stationary trains and coded this as "connectivity." So we went back to the community and confirmed what the community actually cared about: not trains themselves, but the transportation access problem they created.

We follow a handful of rules to make sure that the data stays true:

- Copy verbatim: Notes are copied exactly as agreed upon during workshops; no paraphrasing.
- Tag everything: Even tangential comments get tagged, as they often provide valuable context.
- Photo documentation: Every meeting board is photographed, and photos are tagged with source information for verification.
- Checkpoint saves: After tagging all tables in a district, we save a clean version before any reorganization. If something goes wrong later, we don't have to re-tag from scratch.
- Community confirmation: When keywords are merged or themes are reorganized, we verify with community members before finalizing.

This isn't just data entry. It's the foundation that makes everything else possible. If tagging is inconsistent (one coder calls it "housing" while another calls it "affordability"), the District Mention Rates become meaningless. If context isn't preserved, you lose the ability to distinguish between "code enforcement for illegal dumping" versus "code enforcement for property maintenance." Consistent tagging, community validation, independent coding, and showing the work is what transforms sticky notes into analyzable data.

Table 4. Coder 1's tagged community input from North District Area 1's first workshop

Source	Keyword	Notes/Context
JH-N-A1-WS1	Parks	Douglas Park not meeting goals, still waiting on promised improvements
JH-N-A1-WS1	Illegal Dumping	No specific actions
JH-N-A1-WS1	Trains	Old rail car and tracks are in the wooded area; trains blocking access from neighborhood, sits for hours

An added bonus we weren't anticipating: using the Memphis Engagement Framework allowed us to reestablish trust in neighborhoods that weren't just skeptical about planning, they were downright hostile. Our experience in the Glenview neighborhood demonstrates the value of our approach in supporting the fundamental responsibility of planners: serving the communities we work in.

Glenview: When Trust Has to Be Rebuilt from Scratch

Glenview is a predominantly Black, working-class historic neighborhood within Memphis's Core City planning district. Before we ever showed up to engage them in the *Memphis 3.0* update process, a third-party organization we'll call "Stop *Memphis 3.0*" had already poisoned the well.

Stop Memphis 3.0 wanted to stop *Memphis 3.0* entirely—they launched a campaign to put a moratorium on any decisions based on the comprehensive plan, circulating petitions to the mayor and creating infrastructure to undermine the entire process. The group was composed mostly of residents from more affluent neighborhoods who appeared to be primarily motivated by resistance to any multifamily housing in their own primarily single-family neighborhoods. Rather than engaging with the actual planning process, they decided to kill the whole thing by discrediting it.

What made their campaign particularly insidious was how strategic they were. They changed their message depending on which neighborhood they were targeting, always finding the specific fear that would resonate most. They told Glenview that *Memphis 3.0* would destroy their historic character and destabilize their community. They told Cooper-Young that multifamily housing would ruin their neighborhood. They went door-to-door with the future land use map, telling residents that every "orange" area meant duplexes and apartments would replace their homes, while "tan" areas would be "unaffected"—implying that density itself was the threat. They were smart, adaptable, and ruthless in using whatever narrative would recruit people to their cause of stopping the plan.

By the time we arrived to do engagement in Core City, Stop *Memphis 3.0* had already made "Don't Let *Memphis 3.0* Sellout Your Community" yard signs, built an unofficial *Memphis 3.0* website filled with false information, and held unofficial *Memphis 3.0* meetings without our knowledge. They actively blocked our normal pre-engagement efforts and made sure Glenview residents arrived at district workshops convinced that we wanted to destroy their historic neighborhood by adding duplexes and renters who wouldn't take care of their properties. For Glenview specifically, the threat was framed around historic preservation— Stop *Memphis 3.0* convinced them that duplexes would degrade their neighborhood's character. And while most of the more resourced neighborhoods Stop *Memphis 3.0* approached had one or two planning-engaged residents who either reached out to us directly or took the organization's claims with a grain of salt, Glenview didn't have that context. They had no reason not to believe the people who showed up claiming to help protect their community.

When we attempted our usual pre-engagement in Core City, it had been pre-empted. We arrived at the first district workshop in a giant Catholic church fellowship hall expecting a normal meeting. We'd done extensive pre-engagement work and thought we'd built good relationships. Instead, Glenview residents told us point-blank: "You don't care about us. You want to destabilize our historic community by adding more renters who won't take care of their properties." The accusation wasn't just about duplexes as a housing form—it was about protecting Glenview's historic character from what they'd been told was a city plan to flood their neighborhood with rental properties that would erode everything they'd worked to preserve.

Stop *Memphis 3.0* representatives were in the room, mostly staying quiet and letting a few of their recruited community members voice the accusations. Our planners were shocked and upset—and quite honestly, they felt betrayed. We had done so much pre-engagement work, and yet community members came in so angry and convinced we were the enemy. We still don't entirely know how Stop *Memphis 3.0* developed their specific narratives for each neighborhood or why they targeted *Memphis 3.0* with such intensity. But in that moment, we did the only thing we could: we took notes, we recorded everything, we didn't argue, and we listened.

At the second workshop, we showed Glenview residents our notes from the first meeting. They agreed we'd captured what they said accurately. We attempted to move the conversation forward, but it was more of the same—the third-party narrative about duplexes destroying neighborhood character was still dominating. Trying to speak more directly to the actual Glenview residents without the outside agitators controlling the conversation, we asked if we could have a meeting with just Glenview neighbors before the third district workshop, without the Stop *Memphis 3.0* representatives present.

This turned out to be a tactical mistake. Glenview residents got big mad. They blasted us to city council, the planning division director, and the mayor, accusing us of trying to go behind their backs and hide things from the people who were "helping them." We apologized for the misunderstanding and kept going.

At the third district workshop, we gave their data back to them again—but this time, we changed our approach. The comprehensive planning administrator facilitated their tables directly, and the division director acted as a floating facilitator. He ended up spending the entire meeting in a one-on-one conversation with one of the non-Glenview instigators, which allowed the administrator to have a genuinely productive conversation with actual Glenview residents without the outside interference.

That's when the first crack appeared. One Glenview neighbor said something I'll never forget: "I understand you and it makes sense, but I don't think I'm supposed to like it." That moment—someone admitting that the data made sense even though they'd been told they should oppose us—was the turning point.

After that third workshop, Glenview residents accepted our offer to have a conversation with just Glenview neighbors.

We met in a small church basement. (Two non-neighbors still showed up, but they mostly sat in silence or asked leading questions they didn't think we'd be able to answer.) We explained everything. We showed them how their conversations had impacted the plan. We showed them the comparative data: here's what you said, here's what other districts said, here's why those contexts were different, and here's why a broad citywide historic preservation policy would be inappropriate when most historic districts already have landmark protections.

Then Core City Planner Isaac did something brilliant that cut through the entire "duplexes will destroy your neighborhood" narrative. He showed them two photos of houses in their own neighborhood and asked: "Which one is the duplex and which is the single-family home?" They couldn't tell the difference. Stop *Memphis 3.0* had convinced them that duplexes were a visible threat to their historic character, but when faced with actual examples from their own streets, residents couldn't identify which form was which. The form wasn't actually the problem—the fear of what duplexes represented (renters, instability, loss of character) was the problem.

Because our prior workshops had identified one of Glenview's actual priorities as increasing homeownership, we were able to reframe the entire conversation: "If that house you couldn't identify as a duplex had two different owners because it was technically two different lots, would that be okay?" They all said yes—because it would increase opportunities for homeownership, which is what they actually cared about. The duplex wasn't the enemy; lack of homeownership opportunities was the concern. Once we separated the fear from the form, we could have a real conversation.

Glenview residents had so much fun in that meeting that they invited us back a second time—not to negotiate plans and policies, but just to talk about appropriate housing types. They went from "you're going to destroy our neighborhood!" to "we still don't like duplexes, but single-family attached is okay." Hey, progress is progress. Now Glenview is a friend of the plan. We're even featured on their neighborhood social media page, and the neighborhood association president regularly checks in with us.

The Memphis Engagement Framework gave us the tools to rebuild trust when a third party had deliberately destroyed it using fear tactics tailored to specific neighborhood anxieties. We could prove we listened by showing them their exact words, tracked and validated. We could prove their concerns weren't being ignored by demonstrating how their input shaped district-level recommendations. We could prove that a citywide historic preservation policy wasn't appropriate by showing them tagged, validated data from other planning districts. Most importantly, we could show them that what they actually cared about—homeownership, neighborhood stability, historic character—wasn't threatened by the comprehensive plan. We weren't asking them to trust our intentions; we were showing them our work and letting them verify our interpretation of their priorities.

That's what systematic accountability looks like: not promises that we care, but evidence that we acted on what they said. The framework didn't just help us understand what Glenview wanted. It helped Glenview see that we understood, and that what they wanted actually made it into the plan.

Making the Framework Work in Your City

The Memphis Engagement Framework is a proven approach for delivering meaningful, verifiable public engagement that can work in any city. You don't need a full department or a research grant to make the framework work. What you need falls into three basic categories: people, technology, and time. Each matters differently, but together they form the infrastructure that makes engagement measurable instead of performative.

- **People**. Start with one person who owns the system, who will be responsible for consistency, quality control, and training others. This role is less about authority and more about stewardship: the process keeper ensures data is collected the same way every time, meetings are coded accurately, and the math remains honest. Beyond that, you need facilitators who can listen without leading, and at least two staff who can independently code and compare data. The disagreements between coders often contain the best insights. Build a culture of reflection, not perfection: you'll improve the method every time you use it.
- **Technology**. At its simplest, this framework can run on a spreadsheet. Excel or Google Sheets is enough to start. The math is simple; the discipline is what matters. If your city has capacity, you can eventually move to a database that tracks input through drafts and decisions, but fancy software won't fix bad habits. Start by standardizing templates with columns for district, theme, mentions, and notes, and train everyone to use them the same way. Over time, automation or AI tools can help with theme clustering, but human judgment remains non-negotiable.
- **Time**. The real investment is attention. The framework requires upfront time to build templates, train staff, and set up coding systems. Once the system is in place, however, it scales easily. Plan for about two hours of data work after each engagement session and a few hours every quarter to synthesize across districts. Schedule time for debriefs, disagreements, and corrections. That's where accuracy comes from. Treat this work as real planning work, not extra paperwork. The time you invest in tracking input is time you'll save later proving your plan reflects that input.

A final thought on technology: it will eventually make parts of this work faster and more efficient. Machine learning can help cluster themes, natural language tools can spot similar phrases across districts, and dashboards can make accountability visual. But none of that replaces moral intent.

This framework was built on safety, comfort, and meaning; on relationships, not algorithms. The real work still happens in rooms and neighborhoods, long before any data analysis begins. Technology can help us organize and interpret what people share, but it can't do the part that matters most: showing up, listening, and closing the loop (Figure 10, p. 15).

Figure 10. Ultimately, meaningful community engagement is built on connecting with people: showing up, listening, and closing the loop (Memphis Office of Community Planning)

The Memphis Engagement Framework isn't about capacity; it's about commitment. With a few trained people, basic tools, and protected time, any city can move from "we heard you" to "here's the proof that we heard you."

Phasing and Partnerships

You don't have to scale the Memphis Engagement Framework all at once. Start with one district, one corridor, or one pilot project and prove that it works on a small scale before going citywide. Pilots build confidence, refine your workflow, and provide real data to demonstrate leadership. Once you've demonstrated success, expansion becomes a matter of replication, not reinvention.

Partnerships can stretch your capacity. Interns, graduate students, and university research centers are often looking for meaningful, real-world data projects. Academic partnerships bring rigor, extra hands, and outside credibility. Treat collaboration as a multiplier: each partner adds bandwidth and perspective you wouldn't have alone.

Most importantly, remember that you don't have to do this alone. Other cities are experimenting with similar systems, and Memphis is happy to share templates, tools, and lessons learned.

Getting Started

When it comes to getting started, you don't have to implement everything at once. In fact, you shouldn't. Here's a suggested timeline to test the waters:

- Week 1: Read this *Memo* (congrats, you did it!) and decide which pieces fit your capacity and your city's culture.
- Month 1: Try it in one meeting: track themes manually in a spreadsheet, count how many times things come up, note spatial patterns, and see if the logic works for your data.
- Quarter 1: If it works, train two more people and pilot the District Mention Rate on a small area plan or corridor study.
- Year 1: Build it into your standard practice, implement the full Community Theme Scoring, document your lessons learned, note the things that worked and the things that didn't improve the method, and make it yours.

Your city isn't Memphis, and your engagement won't look like ours. Your political, cultural, and historical contexts will shape how you weigh variables, what you measure, and what "meaningful" looks like. That's the point. The formulas, templates, and training modules can be adapted anywhere, but the soul of it is context: your city's culture, power dynamics, and planning history will determine which citywide theme you weight most heavily, whether you normalize by households instead of tables, and whether you weight language consistency differently.

Adaptation isn't compromise; it's how good ideas become great practice. Take what works. Change what doesn't. Build something better than what we built and share it with the rest of us.

The best time to start was five years ago. The second-best time is now. Here in Memphis, we want to offer you what we learned so you don't have to start from scratch. This work is too important to gatekeep. Planning is better when we share what works and what doesn't. Email me at christina.edingbourgh@memphistn.gov and I'm happy to troubleshoot your specific context or talk through methodological questions.

Conclusion

The Memphis Engagement Framework was built for Memphis—our history, our failures, our determination to do better—but the logic behind it is universal. Every city that's ever done engagement knows the "we said/they said" problem. Every planner has felt the frustration of doing good work that disappears into a file. Every community has asked, "What happened to what we told you?" and gotten silence in return. This framework is one way to fix that.

Engagement without impact is just performance, and our communities deserve more than a show. The Memphis Engagement Framework is not about how to do engagement; it's the evidence that engagement mattered. It's proof that we listened. It's proof that listening shaped policy. It's proof that community voice didn't disappear into a file cabinet but became part of the institutional memory of how this city makes decisions. Your city can build that proof too. Let's make it true everywhere.

About the Author

Christina Edingbourgh is the administrator of the City of Memphis Office of Comprehensive Planning, where she leads the *Memphis 3.0* five-year update. She brings eight years of community development experience to municipal planning, having previously served as a neighborhood planner for a local community development corporation and later as director of neighborhood planning at a community development intermediary. She began her municipal planning career in 2024, bringing a practitioner's perspective from the community side of the table to reimagining how cities can authentically engage communities and prove that engagement leads to policy change.

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