

MTC ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION + VISION ZERO
SONOMA COUNTY BEST PRACTICE WORKSHOP
9-29-2026

MAKING THE MOST OF COMMUNITY
OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT
DOLLARS

More Bang for Your Buck

■ Mia Candy | Planning Manager, Toole Design

TOOLE
DESIGN



KEY PRINCIPLE

Budget size doesn't determine engagement quality



Under \$30K

can deliver great engagement when strategy drives the spending: the right people, the right questions, the right channels.



\$150K+

can still deliver poor engagement when effort goes into activity instead of outcomes.

The goal isn't always cheaper or less engagement, It's better upfront strategy.

TODAY WE'LL LOOK AT



How to balance breadth and depth



Cost-effective, high-impact strategies

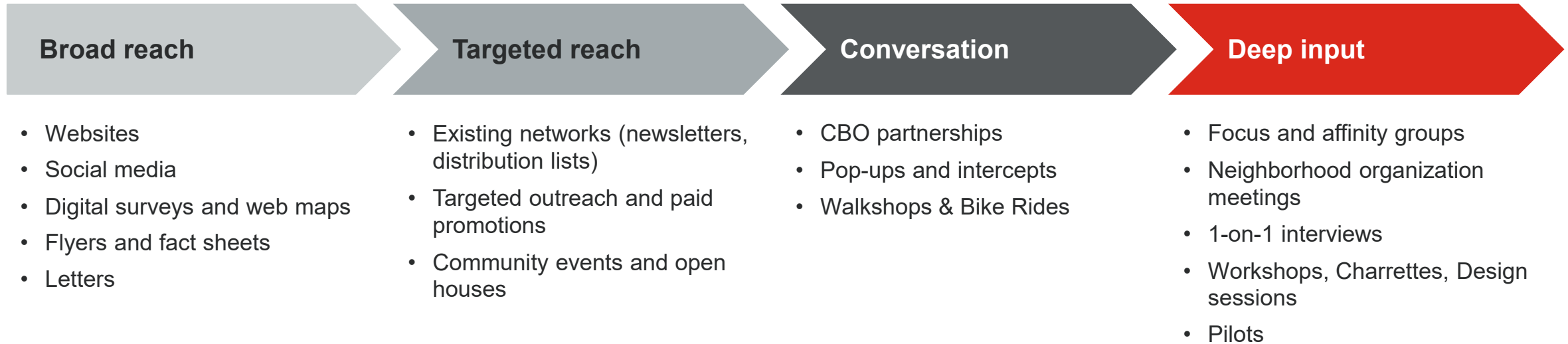


Resource-intensive, low-return habits

Striking a balance between reaching more people, and having better conversations

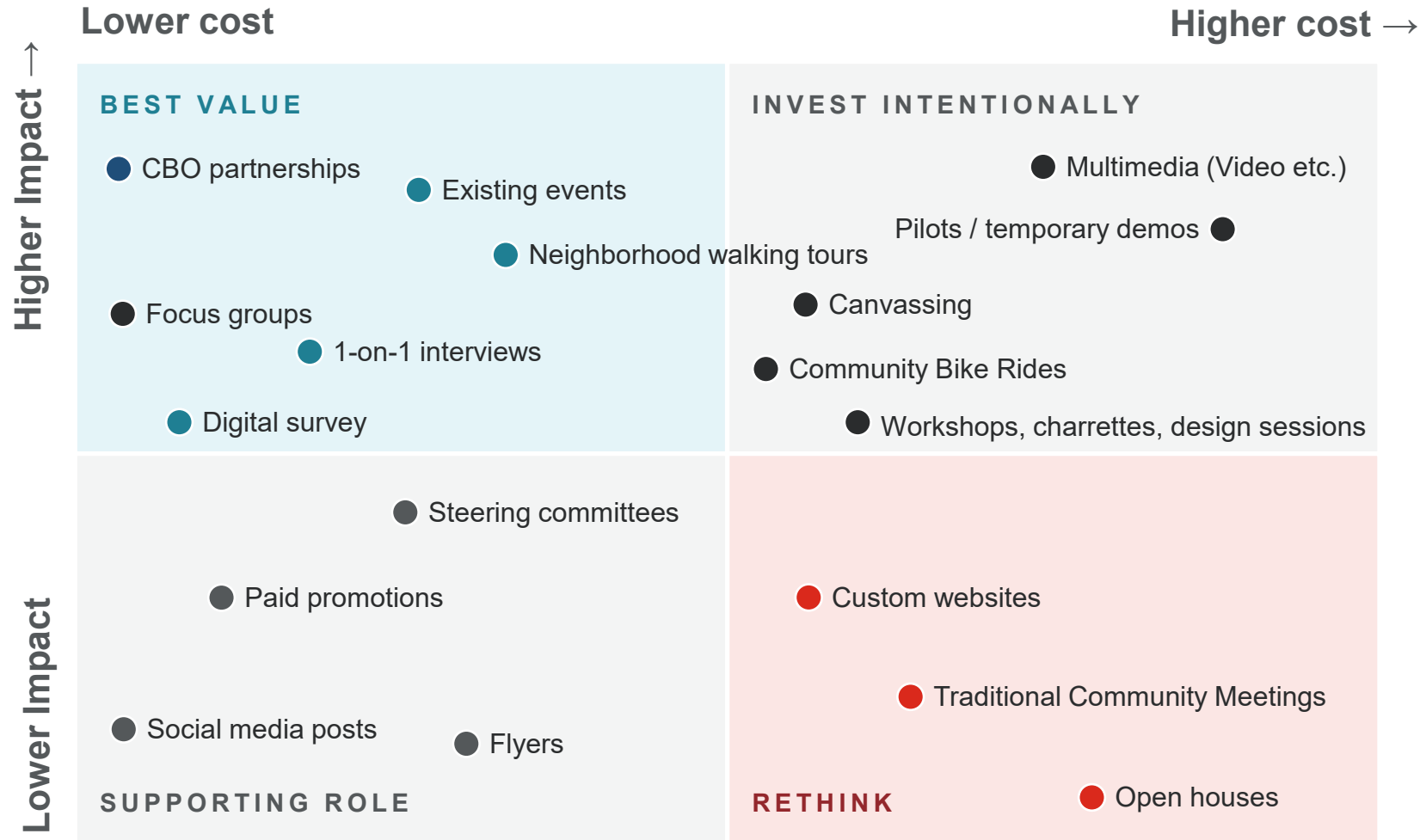
BROAD

DEEP



Underpinning every level: internal and partner collaboration among city staff, agencies, CBOs, and key stakeholders.

Impact isn't always proportional to cost



Reading the map

- Best value**
 Low cost, high impact. Build your plan around these.
- Invest intentionally**
 Worth the spend when tied to clear decisions.
- Supporting role**
 Useful for awareness; don't rely on them for input.
- Rethink**
 High effort, thin returns. Use sparingly or redesign.

The right strategy turns modest resources into meaningful engagement.

A quick read on relative cost and reach

Creative outreach

Cost Reach

Pop-up tabling at community events		
Temporary demos or installations		
Hands-on charrettes		
Interactive, informative games		
Walk audits and walkshops		
Targeted listening sessions		
Translated materials		

Online outreach

Cost Reach

Project website		
Online surveying		
Interactive crowdsourcing maps		
Social media and targeted ads		

Traditional outreach

Cost Reach

Workshops and open houses		
Steering committee meetings		
In-person or intercept surveying		
Neighborhood organization meetings		

 Low  Medium  High

Right-size the mix to each community's goals, timeline, and budget. Ratings are relative, not absolute.

 WHERE TO RETHINK

**Not every engagement dollar
creates impact.**

Low-Medium Cost / High Impact Strategies



Focus Groups/ Affinity Groups

Small, facilitated conversations that produce input you can act on.



Neighborhood Walking Tours

See conditions on the ground alongside the people who live with them.



CBO Partnerships and Ambassadors

Trusted messengers extend your reach through existing networks.



1:1 Interviews

Meet people at places they already go instead of asking them to come to you.

Working with Community Based Organizations and Ambassador Programs

COST

Medium

IMPACT

High

CBO partnerships expand reach while bringing trusted local knowledge and relationships to the project.



Benefits

- Build on trusted community relationships
- Reach residents with limited prior access to the planning process
- Leverage existing networks and communication channels
- Gain local knowledge and lived experience
- Extend limited staff and engagement resources



Considerations

- Understand and plan for limited capacity
- Partner early to build trust and shape the approach together
- Be clear about roles, expectations, and decision-making
- Allow flexibility in outreach methods and timelines
- Budget for translation, interpretation, and accessibility
- Compensate fairly for time and expertise

Resource: Toole Design tip sheet on paid community partnerships

Familiar formats that often cost more than they return



! Flyers

Printed by the thousands, often discarded, and hard to track.



! Traditional meetings and presentations

Mostly one-way, and attendance tends to reflect the usual participants.



! Open houses

Staff-heavy, with input often too general to shape decisions.

Town halls and public meetings: use them for the right job

COST

Medium–High

IMPACT

(Can Be) Low

Go beyond one-size-fits-all:
choose strategies based on
reach, depth, and cost.



Benefits

- Share information with a broad audience
- Create a visible, public-facing opportunity
- Provide a forum to present project milestones
- Offer multiple ways to review and respond
- Can “check the box” to ensure



Considerations

- Can require significant staff time and resources
- Often yields limited depth of feedback
- Attendance may not reflect the broader community
- Timing, location, and format can create barriers
- Pair with targeted outreach so all affected residents can take part

COMMON PITFALLS

Avoiding engagement “waste”

- 01** **Defaulting to the same approach every time**
Not every project needs a town hall or a survey.
- 02** **Asking the wrong questions**
Collecting input that can't inform a project decision.
- 03** **Mismatching engagement to the project phase**
E.g., asking about general values during design refinement.
- 04** **Focusing on quantity over quality**
More events and responses don't guarantee better input.
- 05** **Over-documenting**
Lengthy reports rarely add more useful information.



INSTEAD OF THIS... TRY THIS

Small swaps that stretch engagement dollars

INSTEAD OF

✗ Printing thousands of flyers that get thrown away

✗ Interpreting and translating everything for every event, even when few limited-English speakers attend

✗ Hosting a standalone town hall

✗ A 20-page engagement summary

✗ Investing heavily before knowing who you need to reach



TRY

✓ Yard signs, trusted CBO channels, local radio, and outlets people already read or listen to

✓ A small in-language focus group led by a CBO or native speaker.
Result: 30+ non-English speakers per project vs. the typical 0–10.

✓ Pop-ups at existing community events where people already gather

✓ A 2-page graphic overview of key stats, plus a list of how input changed the recommendations

✓ A quick audience scan first: who's affected, which languages, which channels they trust

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Making every engagement dollar count



Choose your balance

Decide on breadth vs. depth before picking tactics.



Spend for impact, not activity

Cost and impact aren't linked. Strategy stretches modest budgets.



Work through trusted messengers

Partners and existing networks reach people flyers can't.



Use what you gather

Ask questions that inform decisions, then show how input shaped the outcome.

Thank you

Questions and ideas welcome

■ **Mia Candy** | Planning Manager, Toole Design

Further reading: ECWRPC Equitable Engagement Toolkit and Guidebook (strategy toolkit, p. 43)

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