Getting Buy-in for Big, Bold (or Contentious) Ideas

WHO WE SPOKE TO:

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If three or more of the following conditions apply, you might be dealing with a big, bold, or potentially contentious project:

- You don't have any money
- You don't have the necessary permissions
- You're dealing with a sensitive or "hot button" issue that people have strong opinions about, or a high-attention piece of property
- There are multiple kinds of stakeholders involved

Why is it important for me to seek approval from the community for my big, bold idea?

One, these kinds of projects generally influence the public realm—remember that you're working in our backyard, not your own. Two, your project will be easier to accomplish with a team and volunteers backing you up—and it's actually very beneficial to get that backup from multiple people with diverse perspectives. You know how you think about your project, but conversations with others will help you shape your ideas and ultimately improve your outcomes.

What kinds of people and entities should I be looking to connect with?

Every situation is different, but in all cases you want to think
- **about who will be affected by your project. This usually includes:**

  The residents near your project site (not necessarily every
- single person, but the closest ones for sure)Small business owners
- near your project site
- Users of any nearby parks
  Owners of any private property nearby
  Local government officials and agencies. You want to make sure you won't be disrupting any of their pre-existing plans, and they can help you get beneficial publicity and permissions.

When you're looking for partners, choose people who understand the big picture of what you want to get done, and those with skillsets outside your own whose strengths will complement yours.

How do I deal with haters?

Make accommodations for skepticism and criticism.
After reminding people that your project is only temporary, make sure you listen to their concerns and address them as fully as you can. If they're worried about large crowds at your event, for example, be sure to adhere to strict start and end times, hire security, provide trash cans, etc. Be considerate and try to understand their side.

Frame your idea as a community conversation.
Sure, you have a specific project in mind, but you can also stress that the underlying purpose of what you're doing is to make the community better, bring neighbors together, etc. Orienting people back to your larger goal can keep them from obsessing over the details.

Don't get discouraged.
While you want to consider all the feedback you get, don't abandon your project just because some Negative Nelly is throwing unnecessary shade. Just say you appreciate their thoughts and want to be a good neighbor, then continue on with your team.

Tommy's Tips for Getting Buy-In for Big Ideas:

Reach out

Research who's done similar projects elsewhere and give them a shout; people are almost always happy to offer their advice and support. In community development, we're all learning as we go and want to see each other succeed.

Measure everything.

Take a survey of people's opinions, promote a hashtag and run searches on it, keep tabs on donations pledged and collected... Everywhere you can, track community engagement metrics. They're great for proving you have neighborhood support for your idea, and they can help you improve your methods as you see what works for people and what doesn't. You'll always be surprised by something.

Find your hook

Is there a crisis or recent news event that can make the case for your project's relevance and importance? If the issue you're focused on is already on people's minds, make that the introduction to what you want to do and why.

This is only a test.

No matter the nature of your project, it usually works well to plan it as a pilot, and think of it as an experiment to see what works before attempting to make anything permanent. Most cities today are using a "test, then invest" innovation model. So explain that you're doing things on a small scale first—sell the idea of small change!

Be honest.

Don't make promises. Remember that trying something big and bold is a gamble. Reiterate that you've all got a lot to gain and little to lose by trying, then report your outcomes to your stakeholders honestly.