



# Community Engagement Plan for Cuyahoga County Communities

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Prepared by  
Nutter Consulting

## Introduction to Community Engagement

Community engagement is at the heart of successful local climate action. A strong engagement approach builds trust, fosters collaboration, and creates ownership of the actions we take together. By centering equity and inclusion, we can ensure that all voices, particularly those from vulnerable and historically underrepresented groups, inform and benefit from the transition to a more resilient and sustainable future.

This community engagement plan offers practical strategies and tactics for involving stakeholders throughout the climate action planning process. From initial conversations to strategy development and implementation, this plan provides guidance on outreach, communication, and partnership-building methods tailored to each community's context.

Through workshops, listening sessions, surveys, and collaboration with trusted local leaders, communities can co-create solutions that not only reduce greenhouse gas emissions but also deliver important co-benefits like improved public health, cost savings, and stronger local economies. When implemented, these efforts will help build momentum for long-term climate leadership in each pilot community and throughout Cuyahoga County.

## Why Community Engagement?

<i>Anthropogeographical Relevance</i>	Incorporating residents and local constituents makes the plan relevant to the human geography of the area.
<i>Representation and Inclusion</i>	Ensuring that all individuals, particularly those from disadvantaged communities, are represented in the climate action plan makes the content more representative.
<i>Improved Decision-Making and Outcomes</i>	Engaging community members provides unique perspectives, knowledge, and expertise that enrich planning and decision-making processes, leading to more practical, effective, and sustainable plans and initiatives. Community-endorsed outcomes are more likely to be successfully implemented and maintained.
<i>Building Trust and Accountability</i>	Active community input and transparent decision-making build trust between organizations and the public, which is vital for long-term success, fostering buy-in, and leading to ongoing partnerships for plan updates and implementation.
<i>Fostering Inclusion and Social Equity</i>	Ensuring that diverse voices are heard, especially from marginalized or underrepresented groups, making policies and programs more equitable and fair.
<i>Education and Empowerment</i>	Through workshops and other engagement forms, communities become more educated on sustainability issues and practices, fostering a sense of care for their local environment.

## Guiding Principals for Successful Community Engagement

### Authentic Collaboration

Commit to working in partnership with community members, stakeholders, and local leaders, to ensure that their ideas and experiences directly shape the climate action strategies.

### Equity and Inclusion

Prioritize engaging historically underrepresented and vulnerable communities, making sure that benefits and decision-making power are shared fairly across all residents.

### Transparency and Accountability

Share information openly, communicate progress clearly, and hold the project team accountable to community feedback and agreed-upon goals.

### Adaptability to Local Contexts

Recognize that each community has unique needs, assets, and challenges, and tailor engagement approaches and climate strategies accordingly.

### Accessibility

Design engagement opportunities to remove barriers by offering multiple ways for people to participate, ensuring language access, physical accessibility, and culturally appropriate outreach.

### Sustained Engagement

Aim to build long-term relationships with communities beyond one-off events, fostering ongoing dialogue, trust, and collaboration that extend through the planning, implementation, and evaluation phases of climate action.



## Goals for Successful Community Engagement

### Align local leadership engagement with countywide sustainability objectives

When municipal climate action efforts are coordinated with Cuyahoga County's broader sustainability goals, the unified approach amplifies impact across the region.

### Identify top concerns and opportunities unique to each municipality

Gather input on community-specific priorities, challenges, and assets so that climate strategies are tailored to local contexts and deliver meaningful results.

### Build trust and municipal buy-in to support future implementation

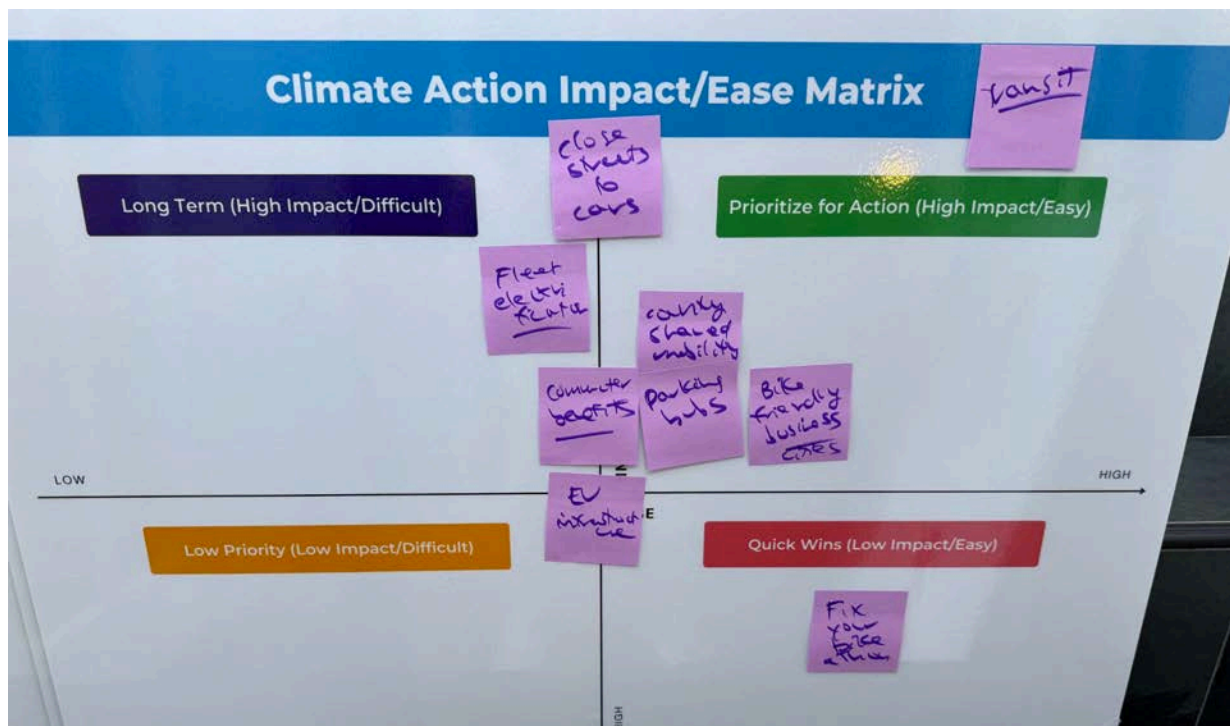
Strengthen relationships with local leaders and stakeholders by fostering transparency, demonstrating responsiveness, and laying the groundwork for collaborative action.

### Create pathways for municipal leaders and community partners to shape climate strategies

Provide inclusive opportunities for stakeholders to contribute ideas, co-design strategies, and take shared ownership of climate solutions.

### Establish feedback loops between municipalities and the County

Develop ongoing channels of communication that ensure local voices inform county planning, while county resources and guidance support municipal implementation.



## Step by Step Guide to Designing Your Community Engagement Program

A successful community engagement plan in climate action involves several key steps:

**Step 1: Define Clear Objectives:** Objectives must be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) and align with both organizational goals and community needs. This includes considering both long-term and short-term goals. It's also possible to allow the community to co-create these objectives.

Defining clear objectives is the foundation of an effective community engagement process. Objectives should be SMART—Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound—to ensure that engagement activities are aligned with both Cuyahoga County's broader strategic goals and the priorities expressed by community members. Establishing well-crafted objectives helps set expectations, guide resource allocation, and create a shared understanding of what the engagement process aims to achieve across departments, partners, and the public.

These objectives should reflect both short-term needs—such as gathering input on immediate policy decisions or strengthening relationships with key communities—and long-term aspirations, including building trust, advancing equity, and shaping policy development over time. Importantly, communities should not only inform the goals but may also co-create them. Inviting community partners, residents, and stakeholders into the objective-setting process ensures that the County's engagement efforts are grounded in lived experiences and shared priorities, ultimately strengthening legitimacy and improving outcomes.

**Step 2: Conducting Stakeholder Analysis:** Systematically identify, map, and categorize stakeholders based on their interest and influence, understanding their needs and expectations.

### **Engage a Broad Range of Stakeholders**

For climate action planning to be effective and durable, it is critical to engage a diverse and representative set of stakeholders. Elected officials—including mayors, council members, and county commissioners—provide leadership, policy alignment, and visibility that can elevate climate action as a community priority. Municipal staff from planning, public works, sustainability, and emergency management bring the technical expertise and operational knowledge necessary to design and implement strategies that

are practical and grounded in existing systems. Their engagement ensures that proposed actions align with municipal capacity and long-term planning objectives.

The perspectives of community organizations and leaders—including nonprofits, advocacy groups, neighborhood associations, and environmental justice leaders—are also essential to ensure that climate solutions are equitable and responsive to community needs. These voices help surface local concerns, opportunities, and lived experiences that might otherwise be overlooked.

Local businesses and institutions such as chambers of commerce, major employers, hospitals, utilities, and higher education institutions play a vital role as both partners and implementers. Their engagement helps secure resources, innovation, and workforce pathways that make climate strategies economically viable and socially beneficial. Through engaging a wide range of stakeholders, this diversity and depth of input fosters a holistic, inclusive process that builds trust, generates buy-in, and produces stronger, community-driven climate action plans.

A detailed list of potential Key Stakeholders in Climate Action Planning Community Engagement is below:

Local Community Members: Core stakeholders directly affected by climate impacts, providing local knowledge and insights. This includes residents, homeowners, tenants, families, children, and specifically, local community members of all classes, races, genders, ages, and health.

Government Agencies: Act as regulators and facilitators, providing funding and platforms for dialogue (City Council, Environmental Agency, planning departments, public works, Ohio Department of Transportation).

Local Businesses/Industry: Provide resources and have a vested interest in community well-being (local shops, corporate offices, green startups, utilities like FirstEnergy).

Nonprofit Organizations: Facilitators, mediators, or implementers, focusing on specific issues (food banks, educational charities, advocacy groups, Ohio Environmental Council, Clean Fuels Ohio, Sierra Club Ohio Chapter, Green Umbrella, NOACA , Neighborhood Family Practice).

Educational Institutions: Offer knowledge and expertise (local schools, colleges, universities, student organizations, Ohio PTA, Cleveland State University, Cuyahoga Community College, Case Western Reserve University).

Activists and Community Leaders: Serve as thought leaders or catalysts (community organizers, bloggers, grassroots organizations).

Public Health and Equity Advocates: Local health departments, equity coalitions, disability rights groups, food justice networks.

Youth and Elder Representatives: Youth councils, senior centers, intergenerational coalitions, local high school environmental clubs.

Tribal and Indigenous Communities: Tribal representatives, cultural heritage organizations.

Faith-Based Institutions: Churches, mosques, synagogues, interfaith coalitions, religious leaders involved in environmental justice.

Underrepresented and Impacted Communities: Environmental justice groups, frontline communities, low-income neighborhoods, communities of color, disability advocates.

***Step 3: Budgeting and Resources Allocation:*** Realistically assess time investment (planning, execution, follow-up), financial investment (materials, venues, software), and human resources (staff, volunteers).

Effective community engagement requires a realistic assessment of the time, funding, and staffing needed to carry out meaningful and equitable activities. Begin by estimating the time investment required for each phase of engagement—planning, outreach, execution, analysis, and follow-up. Building in adequate time for coordination across departments, relationship-building with community partners, and transparent reporting back to participants helps ensure a smooth and accountable process.

A clear understanding of financial needs is also essential. This includes budgeting for materials (print and digital), venue rentals, accessibility supports (translation, interpretation, childcare, transportation), engagement software or online platforms, and stipends for community partners when appropriate. Finally, evaluate human resources early in the process. Identify the staff, consultants, and volunteers needed to manage logistics, facilitate meetings, analyze input, and maintain communication throughout the process. Allocating resources intentionally—and proportionate to the scale and purpose of the engagement—supports high-quality interactions, reduces strain on teams, and ensures that all communities can participate meaningfully.


***Step 4: Developing Communication Plans:*** Create internal and external communication plans that align with engagement objectives, analyze the audience, establish channels (e.g., social media, newsletters, in-person meetings, phone calls), set timing, and prepare for crisis management and feedback loops.

A strong communication plan is essential to ensuring that community engagement efforts are coordinated, accessible, and aligned with local objectives. Begin by

developing internal communication protocols that clarify roles, responsibilities, and decision-making pathways among staff and partners. This helps ensure consistent messaging, timely information flow, and alignment across departments. Externally, communication strategies should be guided by the engagement objectives and grounded in an understanding of the intended audience including their preferred channels, languages, digital access needs, and trusted messengers.


A comprehensive communication plan outlines the channels and timing for outreach, ranging from social media, newsletters, and websites to grassroots methods such as in-person meetings, phone calls, and collaboration with community-based organizations. Effective plans also include clear feedback loops to let community members know how their input was used and what decisions or next steps follow. Prioritizing communication that is proactive, culturally responsive, and two-way strengthens trust and supports meaningful participation throughout the engagement process.

**Step 5: Community Involvement Strategy:** Determine the level of community involvement at each stage (inform, consult, involve, collaborate, empower) plus the associated tactics using frameworks IAP2’s Spectrum of Public Participation.



### IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

IAP2’s Spectrum of Public Participation was designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public’s role in any public participation process. The Spectrum is used internationally, and it is found in public participation plans around the world.

**INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION** 

	<b>INFORM</b>	<b>CONSULT</b>	<b>INVOLVE</b>	<b>COLLABORATE</b>	<b>EMPOWER</b>
<b>PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL</b>	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
<b>PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC</b>	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

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## Engagement Strategies Aligned with the Ladder of Engagement Framework

### 1. Inform (Provide Information)

*Goal:* Raise awareness and understanding of climate action.

*Tactics include:*

<b>Host informational webinars and town halls</b>	Offer accessible forums, both virtual and in-person, where residents and stakeholders can learn about climate action plans, hear from experts and ask questions in real time.
<b>Create infographics and short social media explainers</b>	Use visual storytelling and bite-sized content to share key climate facts, highlight community successes and make complex information engaging and shareable.
<b>Provide regular newsletters or updates from municipal leadership</b>	Send ongoing communications from trusted local leaders to keep the community informed, build transparency and maintain momentum as plans and actions progress.
<b>Develop plain-language fact sheets and FAQs about climate impacts and benefits</b>	Create easy-to-read handouts and online resources that explain local climate challenges and solutions in everyday language, highlighting benefits such as cost savings, health improvements and community resilience.

<p><b>Use Gamification tools to further engage and educate the public</b></p>	<p>Games like ClimateFresk can be interesting and <b>engaging</b> tools to help the public understand the impact of climate change locally.</p>
<p><b>Host interactive “show and tell” events that can raise awareness among the community.</b></p>	<p>Events like Sustainable Home Fairs can be an effective way to show new technologies and lower the barrier of entry for residents or businesses to invest in new technology.</p>

**2. Consult (Gather Input)**

*Goal:* Understand concerns, opportunities, and perspectives.

*Tactics include:*

<p><b>Conduct community surveys and polls on top climate issues</b></p>	<p>Gather input from residents through online or paper surveys to identify their most pressing climate concerns and opportunities. Surveys can capture broad participation and provide measurable insights to guide strategy development..</p>
<p><b>Hold listening sessions in neighborhoods and trusted venues</b></p>	<p>Organize small-group conversations in familiar community spaces (like libraries, schools, or faith centers) where residents feel comfortable sharing their experiences, challenges and ideas in their own words.</p>
<p><b>Invite feedback during public comment periods or workshops</b></p>	<p>Build in time during public events and planning workshops for open comments, questions and dialogue so community</p>

	members can influence decision-making directly.
<b>Use interactive online platforms (mapping tools, idea boards)</b>	Leverage digital tools to let participants share input visually, for example, mapping flood-prone areas, adding ideas to a virtual whiteboard or prioritizing actions through online voting.

**3. Involve (Collaborative Dialogue)**

*Goal:* Actively include stakeholders in shaping ideas and options.

*Tactics:*

**Involve Tactics**

<b>Facilitate stakeholder roundtables (businesses, nonprofits, youth)</b>	Bring together diverse stakeholder groups in structured discussions to share perspectives, explore challenges and identify opportunities for collaboration. Roundtables help ensure that different sectors see their role in advancing climate action.
<b>Use participatory design sessions with small groups</b>	Engage community members directly in co-creating climate strategies through hands-on activities like mapping, visioning or scenario planning. This approach values local knowledge and helps generate practical, community-driven ideas.

<p><b>Host cross-community learning sessions among the municipalities</b></p>	<p>Provide space for municipalities to share experiences, lessons learned and successful practices with one another. These peer exchanges foster collaboration and strengthen regional capacity for climate action.</p>
<p><b>Apply “dot voting” or other tools to prioritize strategies collectively</b></p>	<p>Use simple, interactive decision-making tools that allow participants to weigh in on the most impactful or feasible strategies. This makes prioritization transparent, democratic and accessible to all.</p>

**4. Collaborate (Shared Decision-Making)**

*Goal:* Work directly with stakeholders to co-create strategies.

*Tactics:*

**Collaborate Tactics**

<p><b>Form climate advisory committees that include community leaders</b></p>	<p>Establish multi-stakeholder committees with representatives from government, nonprofits, businesses and residents to guide decision-making and provide ongoing input throughout the planning process.</p>
<p><b>Co-develop climate strategies with community-based organizations</b></p>	<p>Work hand-in-hand with trusted local organizations to design strategies that address community-specific needs, ensuring climate action is grounded in equity and lived experience.</p>

<p><b>Create partnerships with institutions (schools, hospitals, utilities) to pilot projects</b></p>	<p>Leverage the resources and influence of anchor institutions to launch demonstration projects that model climate solutions, build momentum, and showcase community benefits.</p>
<p><b>Provide stipends or support to enable community members to participate fully</b></p>	<p>Reduce barriers to engagement by offering stipends, food, childcare, or transportation so residents—especially those from frontline communities—can contribute meaningfully to co-decision-making.</p>

## 5. Empower (Shared Leadership & Action)

*Goal:* Enable communities to lead and sustain climate action.

*Tactics:*

### Empower Tactics

<p><b>Establish ongoing “green teams” or climate action councils</b></p>	<p>Form resident- and stakeholder-led bodies that help drive implementation, monitor progress and propose new initiatives, ensuring climate action remains community-directed.</p>
<p><b>Provide mini-grants for community-led climate projects</b></p>	<p>Offer small, flexible funding to support grassroots initiatives, such as community gardens, energy efficiency upgrades, or resilience hubs, that allow residents to lead solutions.</p>

<p><b>Recognize and celebrate local climate champions</b></p>	<p>Highlight the contributions of individuals, organizations, and businesses through awards, media spotlights, or public events to build pride, visibility, and motivation for continued leadership.</p>
<p><b>Build long-term feedback loops (surveys, annual forums, dashboards)</b></p>	<p>Create systems for residents to regularly evaluate progress, propose adjustments, and hold municipalities accountable, reinforcing the community’s role as co-owners of the climate action plan.</p>

*Step 6: Risk Assessment and Contingency Planning:* Identify potential risks, including exacerbating past harm or historical wrongs, and develop backup plans.

Thoughtful risk assessment is essential to ensuring that community engagement efforts do not unintentionally cause harm or reinforce historical inequities. This begins with identifying potential risks such as triggering past trauma, overlooking key communities, repeating patterns of exclusion, or failing to follow through on commitments. Teams should reflect on the municipality’s historical relationship with different communities and proactively consider how engagement activities may intersect with past harms or mistrust. Assessing logistical risks, such as low turnout, technology failures, or unexpected public concerns, is equally important.

Once risks are identified, develop clear contingency plans that outline how the team will prevent, mitigate, and respond to challenges if they arise. This may include alternative engagement formats, additional accessibility support, backup venues or digital platforms, rapid communication protocols, and steps for repairing trust if something goes wrong. Building intentional safeguards into the engagement process, not just as a reaction, but as part of planning, helps ensure that the municipality can adapt to changing situations while maintaining transparency, accountability, and care for the communities it serves.

## **Process Design Considerations**

*Structured yet Flexible:* Use a clear step-by-step process (inform → consult → involve → collaborate → empower), but remain open to adjusting timelines and methods as community feedback emerges.

*Feedback Loops:* Build in ways to report back to participants (“you said, we did”) to show how input shaped decisions. This sustains trust and participation.

*Multi-Channel Outreach:* Use a mix of in-person and digital engagement methods to reach both broad audiences and specific stakeholder groups.

## **Adaptive Approach Considerations**

*Iterative Engagement:* Communities should treat engagement as an evolving process. Start with lower-intensity tactics (surveys, listening sessions) and build toward more collaborative approaches (advisory groups, mini-grants) as trust and capacity grow.

*Responsive to Feedback:* Adjust engagement strategies based on participation rates, demographic reach, and feedback quality. If one approach isn’t working, shift quickly.

## Sources and Frameworks Informing This Guide

This Community Engagement Guide was informed by nationally recognized public participation frameworks, federal best practices for equitable community engagement, Ohio-specific public involvement guidance, and Cuyahoga County's internal planning experience. Rather than citing individual statements, the Guide draws holistically from these established sources to support its recommended principles, step-by-step processes, and engagement strategies. This approach reflects widely accepted practices in applied planning and community engagement, where guidance documents prioritize clarity, accessibility, and practical implementation while maintaining a transparent foundation in credible research and professional standards.

## References

### ***Foundational Community Engagement Frameworks***

- Clinical and Translational Science Awards Consortium, Community Engagement Key Function Committee, & Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (U.S.). (2011). *Principles of community engagement: Second edition*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.  
<https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/11699/>

Provides the foundational definition of community engagement as a collaborative, mutually beneficial process. Supports the Guide's emphasis on trust-building, equity, inclusion, and long-term relationship development across all stages of engagement.

### ***Public Participation Standards and Levels of Engagement***

- International Association for Public Participation. (n.d.). *IAP2 Core values for public participation*.  
<https://www.iap2.org/page/corevalues>

Establishes widely accepted principles for authentic collaboration, transparency, accountability, and inclusion. Informs the “Guiding Principles for Successful Community Engagement” section of the Guide.

- International Association for Public Participation. (2018). *IAP2 spectrum of public participation* [PDF].  
[https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.iap2.org/resource/resmgr/pillars/spectrum\\_8.5x11\\_print.pdf](https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.iap2.org/resource/resmgr/pillars/spectrum_8.5x11_print.pdf)

Defines the Inform, Consult, Involve, Collaborate, Empower framework used in Step 5 of the Guide to align engagement tactics with levels of community influence and shared decision-making.

### ***Engagement Planning and Stakeholder Analysis***

- Visible Network Labs. (n.d.). *Community engagement 101: Ultimate beginner's guide*.  
<https://visiblenetworklabs.com/guides/community-engagement-101/>

Provides practical guidance on engagement planning, stakeholder identification, and participation strategies. Informs the Guide's step-by-step structure, stakeholder analysis approach, and emphasis on intentional resource allocation.

## ***Equity, Accessibility, and Risk-Aware Engagement***

- Brooklyn Park, Minnesota. (n.d.). *Community engagement planning guide*. City of Brooklyn Park.  
[https://sustainablect.org/fileadmin/Random\\_PDF\\_Files/Equity\\_Action\\_PDFs/CommunityEngagementPlanningGuide.pdf](https://sustainablect.org/fileadmin/Random_PDF_Files/Equity_Action_PDFs/CommunityEngagementPlanningGuide.pdf)

Serves as an example of equity-centered engagement practice, particularly around identifying barriers to participation, avoiding unintended harm, and building safeguards into engagement design. Supports Step 6 on risk assessment and contingency planning.

## ***Ohio-Specific Public Involvement and Equity Context***

- Power A Clean Future Ohio. (n.d.). *Resources on Racial and Environmental Justice*.  
<https://www.powercleanfuture.org/environmental-justice>

Provides Ohio-specific context for environmental justice considerations. Reinforces the Guide's focus on engaging disadvantaged and historically underrepresented communities within the state policy environment.

## ***Local and Project-Specific Context***

- Cuyahoga County. (2024–2026). *Climate action technical assistance project: Internal engagement and planning materials* (Unpublished internal documents).

Represents local knowledge, community context, and prior engagement experience that shaped stakeholder identification, regional alignment, and implementation considerations throughout the Guide.