# WHAT'S NEXT ALEXANDRIA

## HANDBOOK FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

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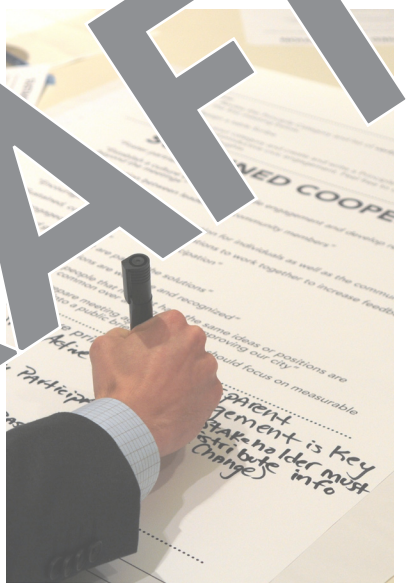

**This June 2013 Preliminary Draft includes the proposed elements and outline of the What's Next Alexandria Civic Engagement Handbook for community review. This preliminary document represents the next step in the community's work to develop a handbook to guide civic engagement. The complete draft of the handbook will be released in July 2013 after incorporation of further detail in each section, including content created at the 4th Community Dialogue on June 24th, as well as input from the community and broad City staff review. The community is invited to provide suggestions and comments on the preliminary draft at alexandriava.gov/whatsnext.**

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## HANDBOOK FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

### CONTENTS


| | |
|---|---|
| Introduction | 03 |
| Focused on Outcomes | 05 |
| Principles of Engagement | 06 |
| Engagement Framework | 14 |
| Shared Responsibility for Community Engagement | 16 |
| Engagement Strategies | 17 |
| Communications Toolbox | 18 |
| Implementation | 19 |
| Evaluation | 20 |
| Conclusion | 21 |
| Appendix | 22 |

# SECTION ONE

## INTRODUCTION

**This June 2013 Preliminary Draft includes the proposed elements and outline of the What's Next Alexandria Civic Engagement Handbook for community review. This preliminary document represents the next step in the community's work to develop a handbook to guide civic engagement. The complete draft of the handbook will be released in July 2013 after incorporation of further detail in each section, including content created at the 4th Community Dialogue on June 24th, as well as input from the community and broad City staff review. The community is invited to provide suggestions and comments on the preliminary draft at alexandriava.gov/whatsnext.**

*What's Next Alexandria* is a City initiative to gather information and develop guidelines for improving and expanding civic engagement in Alexandria. Through a series of community conversations and online participation starting in September 2012, members of the community collaborated with City staff and appointed and elected officials to talk about how Alexandrians can best participate in the public decision-making process that shapes the City.

We know that collaboration between community members and city government leads to better results than working in a vacuum. One without the other misses out on a whole range of good ideas and, more importantly, public decisions that are developed collaboratively better stand the test of time. The *What's Next* initiative focused on understanding how to use civic engagement to improve Community – City collaboration.

Why does *What's Next* use the term "engagement"? And what is civic engagement, anyway?

The term "engagement" appears throughout the *What's Next Alexandria* process because it implies more than simply hosting or attending a meeting. Sometimes, even "participation" isn't a strong enough word. Engagement involves conversations, deliberation, and active feedback. It means creating new relationships with neighbors and actively listening to different points of view. The most powerful tool for planning the future and for solving problems is when community members listen and talk to each other, supported by City staff. That kind of engagement is more effective than citizens communicating ideas one-by-one to City staff and considerably more effective than City staff working alone.

**"We began to think differently and more sensitively about participation in process, what we can bring to the table and how that participation will enrich us as well as the community."**

# SECTION ONE

## INTRODUCTION

Civic engagement rallies community members, City staff, and elected and appointed officials to engage and collaborate with one another on public policy, planning, and development decisions that affect the lives of all Alexandrians.

The City of Alexandria team involved in *What's Next Alexandria* spanned multiple departments, including the City Attorney's Office, the City Manager's Office, Communications and Public Information, the Department of Community and Human Services, the Virginia Health Department, Information Technology Services, Parks, Recreation and Cultural Activities, Planning and Zoning, and Transportation and Environmental Services, as well as ACTion Alexandria, the Alexandria Economic and Development Partnership, and a resident representative. The City engaged Concordia, LLC, a community planning and design firm, to provide technical assistance during this process.

Community collaboration over the course of the *What's Next* process resulted in three key elements: Principles for civic engagement, a standard Framework for civic engagement, and guidance on communications and outreach strategies. Together, these important pieces make up Alexandria's Civic Engagement Handbook to guide all participants in future public decision-making processes in the city.

This Handbook is for people who want to work with their fellow citizens and City staff to:

- Understand how to participate in public decision-making in Alexandria.
- Gain more knowledge about planning and development in Alexandria.
- Build skills to participate in civic engagement processes in a meaningful way.
- Expand participation to include a broad representation of our diverse city.
- Help find solutions for, cooperative, productive, and sustainable public decision-making.

**"We began to think differently and more sensitively about participation in process, what we can bring to the table and how that participation will enrich us as well as the community."**

# SECTION TWO

## FOCUSED ON OUTCOMES

To effectively meet the current and future needs of its residents, organizations, businesses, and industry, the City needs to productively engage its community members in decision-making processes, including planning, operations, and development. Successful civic engagement helps to ensure that every action the City takes is well-informed and maximizes the benefits to the community.

Productive engagement is not the task of local government working alone. The community has an important role to play, as they know best the issues affecting their neighborhoods. A process that will invite ongoing public engagement in policy, resource and planning discussions is empowering and transformative for participants.

The primary goal of the *What's Next initiative* is to improve the quality of Alexandria's public participation process so that members of the community are actively, constructively, and meaningfully involved in the public decisions that affect their lives. The process by which the community is involved must by its nature be realistic, transparent, and representative. Providing neutral and accurate information to representative groups of residents coupled with their collective understanding of the impacts of their participation pays off when projects are implemented that benefit the whole community and align with their vision.

With this goal in mind, this Handbook is a tool for pursuing, achieving, and measuring positive outcomes for civic engagement. What does success look like? Desired outcomes for improved civic engagement are straightforward:

- Improved understanding of the value of working together to solve common problems.
- The public is more informed and has a better understanding of how to participate.
- More people are participating, better representing the City's demographic diversity.
- Members of the community take an active role in organizing their community to participate in civic engagement processes and in the broader goals of the City.
- Decisions and actions by the City are accepted because they reflect public participation in a transparent process.
- There is consistency across City departments in the application of civic engagement principles and process.
- Perception of equity in the public decision making process is improved.
- The community and City government have mutual trust in one another.
- Alexandria continues to thrive and is a wonderful place to live and work.

## PRINCIPLES OF ENGAGEMENT

Alexandria's Principles of Civic Engagement were developed by the Community during the *What's Next* process to guide the City and its residents in how Alexandrians can best participate in public dialogue for decisions that shape the city for years to come.

The process for developing the principles began in 2012 and involved an iterative series of community-wide meetings called Community Dialogues. At the First Community Dialogue in November 2012, participants answered the following three questions individually and with their tables:

- What does ideal engagement feel like?
- What is expected of you as an engaged citizen?
- What do you expect in return for your effort?

All responses were catalogued and synthesized following the meeting and brought back to during the Second Community Dialogue for participants to review and craft "principle statements". Community facilitators then collaborated with City staff to synthesize the 17 principle sentences into 8 draft Principle Statements.

Finally, the draft principles were presented online for the community to affirm. Once confirmed, the Final Principles of Civic Engagement were official.

Complete documentation of the community's work in developing the principles, as well as the complete *What's Next Alexandria* process, can be found on the City website at www.alexandriava.gov/WhatsNext and in the appendix of this document.

The following Principles for Civic Engagement serve as the foundation for public participation in Alexandria.

## PRINCIPLES OF ENGAGEMENT

**EASY PARTICIPATION**
Alexandria promotes open and readily accessible government. Communications and information are timely, easy to understand, and offered in a variety of formats, appropriate to a given process. The City will provide clarity about the public decision-making process, including milestones and a defined endpoint. Participants will have the flexibility to participate in a variety of ways, including online and in person.

Actions
- Project scope, deliverables and timeline are shared with the community well in advance of the project start date.
- All materials for the public are written and designed to communicate clearly.
- There is a robust and coordinated communications campaign prior to and throughout the project.
- All partners (City, community, individuals, organizations, and businesses) work together to invite and increase awareness, participation, and engagement for the duration of the project.
- Multiple opportunities for both online and in-person participation and input are available throughout the project.

Outcomes
- Citizen participation is robust both in community meetings and online.
- Participants generally represent the demographics of the City or the project area.
- Meeting evaluations demonstrate that typical barriers to participation (such as too many meetings, limited notice of meetings, lack of online information or opportunities for input) have decreased.
- The number of residents from the community invested in civic engagement processes is growing.

## PRINCIPLES OF ENGAGEMENT

### EARLY INVOLVEMENT

Alexandria identifies and involves stakeholders early in decision-making processes. Community members are involved in framing issues before any conclusions have been drawn, requiring early and ongoing communication with participants through each phase in the process.

Actions

- Community members have the opportunity to shape the project's definition, scope, expected timeline, and strategy for engaging the public.
- Outreach occurs well before the project begins so that residents have time to prepare for active participation.
- Planning and completing the project is highly collaborative and the community's opportunity for involvement is clearly delineated and broadly communicated.

Outcomes

- Citizens participate from the beginning and throughout the project.
- Projects are better defined and scoped.
- Issues of importance to the community are identified early so that resources can be applied toward resolving them.
- There is broad support for the completed project.

### EVALUATION

The City will work in partnership with the community to periodically assess the application of civic engagement principles. The evaluation will quantify participant feedback, document lessons learned, and identify strategies for refinement.

Actions

- Participants are asked to complete a simple evaluation form at the end of each public meeting or at least once during each phase of a process. City staff works collaboratively with residents to address concerns in a way that does not impede the project schedule.
- Evaluations are shared with the community online.
- Following the first year of implementation of the Civic Engagement Handbook, the City will begin annual reviews of civic engagement performance, including recommendations for improvement and revisions to the Civic Engagement Handbook, if needed.
- Recommendations are shared with the public for a round of comments, review and agreement.

## PRINCIPLES OF ENGAGEMENT

Outcomes

- Increased citizen participation. Meeting evaluations indicate that all principles are being met. If not, the engagement strategy will be modified to be more effective before the project is completed.
- The annual review allows "lessons learned" to be applied to future projects.
- Trust in the citizen engagement process increases.

**INCLUSIVENESS AND EQUITY**

Alexandria reaches out to and encourages the participation of all members of the community in dialogue and decision-making processes, including those who will be affected by the issue as well as those who have not historically been engaged. All members of the community are informed and empowered to participate; all views are equally heard and inform the outcome; and all impacts and benefits are fairly distributed.

Actions

- The Communications and Engagement Strategy for each project outlines a plan to reach out to all community members, especially those traditionally under-represented.
- Special attention is given to recruiting people most impacted by a project.
- Agendas and other materials are designed to facilitate easy understanding for all participants.
- The process is respectful of cultural and language differences in the community and will include translation and interpretation when appropriate.

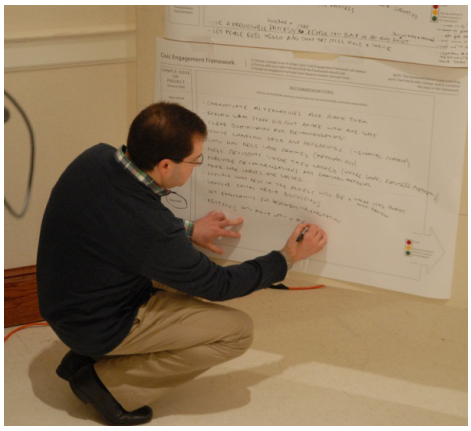
Outcomes

- Participation by under-represented constituents increases and there is some participation by all constituencies impacted by the project.
- Citizens find the process to be understandable, meaningful and worthy of their participation.

## PRINCIPLES OF ENGAGEMENT

**MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT**
Alexandria provides opportunities for all community members to participate in an open and unbiased process, free of predetermined outcomes, to consider and deliberate feasible options. The City authentically solicits, acknowledges, incorporates, and responds to community input.

Actions
- The materials and activities for each project invite meaningful input before any conclusions have been drawn
- Staff presents feasible options for the community to consider and makes it clear what issues are on and off the table.
- Staff demonstrates how research, analysis and community input shapes decision points and recommendations at each phase in the process.
- Ongoing evaluation informs whether processes should change and how they should be modified.



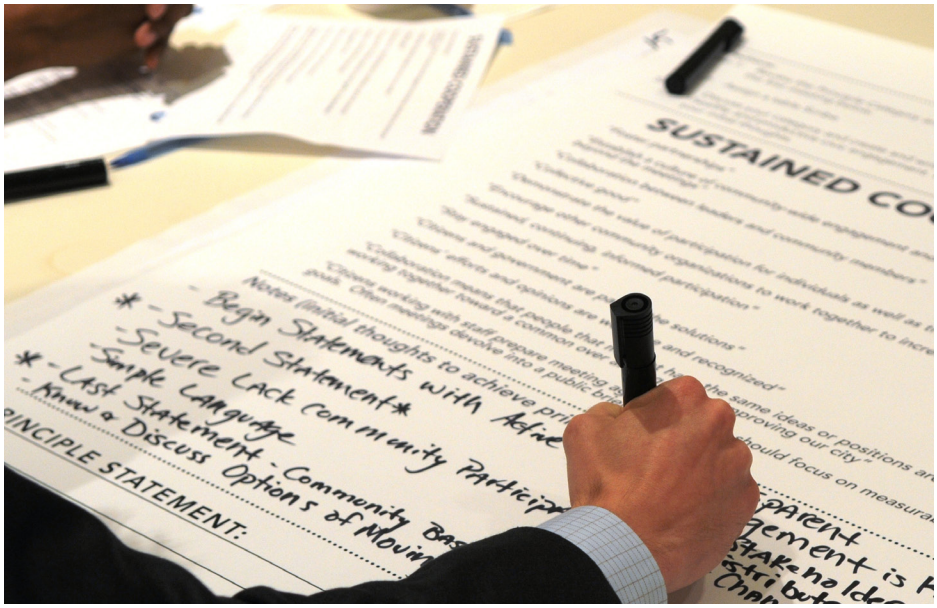
Outcomes
- Community members understand and accept the purpose of proposed projects.
- Projects proceed with less conflict; where there is not consensus, each alternative is given fair consideration.
- Participants clearly see the impact of their participation throughout the process.
- Results of projects are beneficial to the community and the city overall.
- There is increased confidence in the process and project outcomes.

## PRINCIPLES OF ENGAGEMENT

**MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY**
The City and community are mutually accountable for a fair process, honest and respectful participation, informed and fact-based discussion, outcomes that reflect citizen input, and acceptance of the result. City processes will include meaningful assessments to measure progress, implementation of improvements as needed, and effective communication of both.

Actions
- All participants, including community members and City staff, demonstrate their respect for people's time and effort by following the engagement principles and conducting productive meetings and online activities.
- Community members and City staff share in the responsibility to conduct a meaningful process and encourage each other's efforts with positive reinforcement and constructive criticism. Process documentation and outcomes illustrate the shared responsibility.
- Resources for citizen engagement are appropriately applied both by the City and residents.
- Opportunities for evaluating the process are clearly communicated using tools outlined in the communications strategies developed by community members and staff.

Outcomes
- Outreach, engagement and decision making is improved.
- Increased trust in City government.
- Members of the community are assisting the City with community organizing and participation.



## PRINCIPLES OF ENGAGEMENT

**RESPECT**
Alexandria values a process of engagement where participants demonstrate respect in words and actions and approach decisions with open-mindedness so that everyone feels comfortable expressing their opinion regardless of differences.

Actions
- The City recruits and trains staff and community facilitators to assist with and manage productive meetings.
- Rules of engagement grounded in mutual respect are clearly articulated from the beginning of the project by City staff and facilitators.
- Participants support facilitators and the project team and share responsibility for maintaining respect of all participants in the projects.

Outcomes
- Participants build meaningful relationships with one another and focus on the work to be accomplished in each project.
- Participants respect the outcome for the greater good of the City even if they do not agree with all recommendations

**SUSTAINED COLLABORATION**
Alexandria promotes a culture of community engagement that enhances public decision making processes and invests in long-term working relationships, learning opportunities and ongoing, open collaboration between community members, community groups, City leaders and staff.

## PRINCIPLES OF ENGAGEMENT

Actions

- Community members volunteer to serve in supportive roles such as community organizing, meeting facilitation, and evaluation committees.
- Leaders of organizations, businesses, associations and clubs are actively recruited by the City as active partners in civic engagement.

Outcomes

- The tools available for recruiting community members to engage in City projects are streamlined and easily executed.
- Community organizations, businesses, associations and clubs formally agree to active participation in projects as appropriate.
- Civic engagement principles and practices are widely known and understood and therefore residents know how to participate and increase their degree of involvement.

**TRANSPARENCY**

City government will act with integrity in an open process, and will provide timely access to clear, trustworthy information, presented and employed by all parties from the beginning to the end of the process, including the reasoning that leads to and supports the policy conclusion.

Actions

- Staff ensures that public meetings are accessible and organized for easy participation.
- All background information and meeting materials are shared with the community well in advance of public meetings.
- Materials are informative, impartial, and easily comprehended.
- All public input is shared publicly and the City demonstrates how it will shape recommendations.
- Results of meeting evaluations are posted online.

Outcomes

- Participants understand the purpose of the project and their role in the decision-making process.
- Community members have access to all of the information that is used to make a decision in a form that is easy to understand.
- The City understands the needs of the community members for productive participation.
- The community has a clear understanding of how public input shaped the final recommendation.

## ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

**The remaining sections of the preliminary draft are provided in outline form to indicate the topics and points to be covered for community review. These sections will be completed subsequent to June 24th incorporating content created at the 4th Community Dialogue as well as other community input and broad City staff review. The community is invited to provide suggestions and comments on the preliminary draft at alexandriava.gov/whatsnext.**

Framework for the Civic Engagement Process

A. Full page framework template (next page)
B. Value of the framework (why it was developed)
   i. Consistency across City Departments
   ii. Shared understanding of what to expect (phases, engagement strategies, tools, deliverables)
   iii. Benefit: building trust and transparency in a realistic achievable way
C. Instructions for use
   i. i. Staff fills out and shares proposed Framework with the community in advance of starting a process (digital and paper copies)
   ii. ii. Content to be included:
      a. Goal and timeline for project
      b. Deliverables for each phase of the project
      c. Activities required to accomplish deliverables
      d. Anticipated number of meetings needed within each phases. (Some projects may require few public meetings, and more complex projects may require more than one meeting per phase).
      e. Tools to be used for each phase.
   iii. Guiding criteria to assist staff in determining projects' civic engagement scope
   iv. Accountability for ensuring consistent use within and across departments

**"We expect action, respect, impact, inclusion, explanation of decisions, community services, engagement with elected officials, responsive and accountable to our feedback. We expect a voice."**

# Civic Engagement Framework

**City Department:** **Project:** **Goal :** **Overall project timeline:**

## Phase 1 Information *(Gathering, Organizing, Understanding)*

**Key Principles:**
Meaningful Engagement
Mutual Accountability
Early Involvement
Easy Participation
Inclusiveness and Equity

**Engagement Activities:**
- ☐ Hold public meetings that are well-organized and include group work to hear community opinions
- ☐ Collect research and identify community concerns
- ☐ Educate community on important issues about the project (online and in person)
- ☐ Reach out to the community to encourage participation (phone calls, door knocks, flyers, online)
- ☐ Visit a project location as a group

**Tools:**
- ☐ Offer online participation (surveys, forums, social media)
- ☐ Use graphics, maps, 3D models, & pictures to explain project

**Products:**
- ☐ Community engagement plan
  A preliminary report that describes the project, schedule, tasks, and budget
- ☐ Clear goals for each step of the process that must be met before moving to the next step
- ☐ Community's list of issues to address and their view of what we should be working toward

## 2 Options *(Discuss and Evaluate Options)*

**Key Principles:**
Sustained Collaboration
Easy Participation
Transparency
Inclusiveness and Equity

**Engagement Activities:**
- ☐ Hold public meetings that are well-organized and include group work to hear community opinions
- ☐ Provide information about options, including what has worked well in other places
- ☐ Research possible options and potential impacts

**Tools:**
- ☐ Offer online participation (surveys, forums, social media)
- ☐ Hold group meetings with people who are affected by project
- ☐ Use graphics, maps, 3D models, & pictures to explain project

**Products:**
- ☐ Short term report with realistic options for achieving the shared view.
- ☐ Provide tools to help the community choose between the options

## 3 Recommendations

**Key Principles:**
Transparency
Easy Participation
Sustained Collaboration
Mutual Accountability
Meaningful Engagement

**Engagement Activities:**
- ☐ Hold public meetings that are well-organized and include group work to hear community opinions
- ☐ Present final options and how/why they were selected
- ☐ Hold public hearings where community members can make statements for City officials to consider, revise, and/or approve

**Tools:**
- ☐ Offer online participation (surveys, forums, social media)
- ☐ Hold group meetings with people affected by project
- ☐ Hold meetings open to the public for elected officials to hear comments and make decisions

**Products:**
- ☐ Report with options that have been reviewed and chosen. Report will show how community ideas guided the final recommendation, and will include the proposed plan and schedule to complete the work.

## 4 Implementation and maintenance

**Key Principles:**
Transparency
Meaningful Engagement
Sustained Collaboration
Mutual Accountability
Evaluation

**Engagement Activities:**
- ☐ Offer visits to project sites as needed
- ☐ Evaluate how well the plan is being carried out
- ☐ Identify someone from the City who is responsible for the work and who citizens can call
- ☐ Involve the community in carrying out the plan in each phase of the process

**Tools:**
- ☐ Provide a schedule of project activities to carry out the plan
- ☐ Notify community about public meetings

**Products:**
- ☐ Use objective measurements to determine if the community engagement in the decision-making process was successful.
- ☐ Provide regular progress reports

## SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

A. Importance of community's role in engaging broader community, can't be done by the City alone
B. Benefits of community organizing in building capacity for engagement
C. Benefits of establishing an informal network of community ambassadors to partner with the City and other organizations/institutions in increasing engagement and understanding

**"You have successfully brought members from all over the community together and engaged us in a process of getting to know each other and starting to talk about things that matter."**

# SECTION SIX

## ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

A. General guidelines
B. Value of a single iterative process
C. Primary Meeting Types (Best appropriate use, what to avoid)
   i. Community Meetings with Facilitated Small Group Dialogue
   ii. Separate Small Group Meetings
   iii. Open House
   iv. Town Hall
D. Before a Meeting
   i. Background information and data as a foundation
   ii. Cadre of well-trained facilitators to manage and support citizen participation.
      a. Value of volunteer community facilitators
      b. What is expected of a facilitator
      c. WNA facilitators, importance of expanding community facilitator network
      d. Training
      e. When an MC is appropriate
E. Developing a Meaningful Agenda/Conducting the Meeting
   i. Clarity of objectives and how the agenda and activities move the ball forward to produce meaningful results to inform each project.
   ii. Presentation/Information sharing
   iii. Small Group Activities
   iv. Report-outs
F. After a Meeting
   i. Post/distribute engagement results within as short a timeframe as possible after (preferably less than 10 days)
   ii. Share results at beginning of next meeting, showing participants at next meeting how their work has informed the progression of the project
G. In-Person or Online? Guidelines for best use

# SECTION SEVEN

## COMMUNICATIONS TOOLBOX

A. Introduction
   i. What works best for achieving a given objective, what to avoid
B. Person-to-person information sharing
   i. Word of mouth
   ii. Ambassador/Key Communicator/Facilitator network
   iii. Group announcements
C. City Project Website
D. Online Forum
E. Real Time participation in meetings
F. Social Media
G. Print (flyers, posters, billboards, etc.)
H. News Media - Print/Online
I. Email/Enews
J. Texting
K. Telephone
L. US Mail
M. Summary

## IMPLEMENTATION

A. Develop first year action plan
B. Facilitation training for staff and community ambassadors/facilitators
C. Departmental briefings/training in the WNA principles, framework, communications

"We have to find ways to involve the people who have dismissed or given up on the process of engaging in the Democratic process."

# SECTION NINE

## EVALUATION

A. Individual meeting/whole process evaluation
B. Cost/benefit of annual evaluation
C. Who leads this effort
D. Data points and information to consider in the evaluation

# SECTION ELEVEN

## CONCLUSION

# SECTION TEN

## APPENDIX

A. WNA Process
B. Sample Project Framework sheets
C. Resources