PLACEWARD

Community Project Review Guide

A step-by-step guide for researching, evaluating, participating in, and tracking major projects or public decisions in your community.

Use this whether you support the project, oppose it, want changes or protections, or are still deciding.

The goal is not to tell you what conclusion to reach. The goal is to help you build a clear, source-based record before important decisions become irreversible.

Define → Investigate → Act → Track

Public Transparency. Government Accountability. Responsive Representation.

START HERE

How to use this guide

You do not need to become an expert before you participate. Use this guide to identify the few facts, decisions, deadlines, and missing records that matter most. If the project will continue for more than a few days or involves several people, use this guide together with the Placeward Community Project Tracker workbook.

1. Spend 30 minutes completing the Project Snapshot. Do not research every issue first.
2. Find the next actual decision point: meeting, vote, hearing, permit deadline, filing, contract, or other action.
3. Write down the three questions that would most change your view of the project.
4. Begin a Source Register. Give every important source a stable ID and keep the original link or file.
5. Use the issue, claim, meeting, records-request, action, and commitment worksheets only as needed.
6. Review the record after every significant new development instead of letting old claims silently disappear.

What counts as good evidence?

Source type	How to use it
Primary government/court record	Strongest for what was filed, voted, adopted, permitted, ordered, scheduled, or officially recorded.
Developer/company statement	Strong evidence of what the project or company says. It does not independently prove the underlying claim.
Credible reporting/analysis	Useful for context, chronology, interviews, and technical interpretation. Find the primary record when practical.
Community comment/social post	Evidence of concern, support, questions, or requested safeguards. Not proof of the underlying factual claim.
Unknown / unresolved	A valid status. Do not fill missing information with assumptions.

Simple rule

If you cannot answer “What is the source, who created it, and what exactly does it establish?” then you probably have a lead or claim, not a verified fact.

DEFINE

The 30-minute project setup

Do this before diving into technical details. The objective is to understand the decision structure around the project.

☐ Write the project name, location, and the simplest accurate description of what is proposed.

☐ Identify the developer, owner, operator/end user (if known), major consultants, utilities, and public agencies.

☐ Identify the public bodies that can approve, deny, condition, fund, annex, zone, permit, regulate, or enforce.

☐ Find what has already been decided and what remains open.

☐ Find the next known meeting, vote, hearing, permit deadline, court date, or other decision.

☐ List the three questions that would most change your understanding of the project.

☐ List the three outcomes or safeguards your community cares about most.

Project Snapshot worksheet

Prompt	Your notes
Project name	
Location / parcels / nearby landmarks	
What is proposed?	
Developer / owner / operator / major participants	
Decision-makers and agencies	
What has already been decided?	
What remains open or uncertain?	
Next known decision or deadline	
Three questions that matter most	1. 2. 3.
Desired outcomes / safeguards	1. 2. 3.

INVESTIGATE

Claim Check worksheet

Use one Claim Check for any important claim about jobs, taxes, investment, water, electricity, traffic, emissions, noise, safety, property impacts, timing, approvals, ownership, or community benefits.

7. Write the claim exactly enough that another person can tell what is being asserted.
8. Record who made the claim and where.
9. Find the strongest available source that could support or contradict it.
10. Separate what is directly documented from estimates, forecasts, statements, assumptions, and unresolved parts.
11. Record conflicting evidence instead of forcing a single conclusion.
12. Write the current conclusion in cautious language and list what evidence would resolve the remaining uncertainty.

Field	Your entry
Claim	
Who made it?	
Date / context	
Primary source ID(s)	
What the strongest source directly establishes	
What remains attributed / estimated / assumed	
Conflicting evidence	
Current status	☐ Documented ☐ Attributed ☐ Reported ☐ Unresolved
Current conclusion	
Evidence still needed	

INVESTIGATE

Issue Review worksheet

Use this when one issue area needs a durable review. Common examples include land use, water, power, traffic, taxes, public cost, air quality, noise, environmental effects, corporate experience, public process, and permits.

Field	Your entry
Issue / question	
Why it matters here	
What is currently documented	• • •
What is claimed but not independently established	• •
Conflicting evidence	
Important missing records	• • •
Who controls the decision / information	
Next action	
Current status	☐ Well documented ☐ Partially documented ☐ Evidence needed ☐ Active dispute

INVESTIGATE

Public Records Request Builder

A useful records request asks for identifiable existing records. Avoid asking an agency to answer broad questions, perform new research, or explain motives when the information you need should exist in documents.

Better request

“Please provide all applications, staff reports, site plans, traffic studies, utility correspondence, and written conditions submitted or received from January 1 through March 31 relating to [project/site].”

Weaker request

“Please explain everything the county knows about this project and why officials support it.”

Prompt	Your entry
Agency / office	
Project / subject	
Date range	
Specific record categories	1. 2. 3. 4.
Names / addresses / parcel IDs / case numbers	
Preferred format	☐ Electronic copies ☐ Native files if available ☐ Existing searchable PDF
Fee limit / contact before fees exceed	$_____
Delivery email or method	

Plain-language request template

To the records custodian:

I am requesting copies of the following existing public records concerning [project/site/subject]:

• [record category]
• [record category]
• [record category]

Please search the period from [start date] through [end date], including records associated with [names, addresses, parcel IDs, case numbers, or other identifiers]. Electronic copies are preferred. If fees are expected to exceed $[amount], please contact me before fulfilling the request.

Thank you.

Important: public-record laws, response deadlines, exemptions, residency rules, and appeal procedures vary by state. Check your jurisdiction's actual requirements.

ACT

Public Meeting & Comment Planner

The strongest public participation is tied to a specific decision. Work backward from what the board, commission, agency, court, or official can actually decide.

Field	Your entry
Meeting / hearing / decision	
Date, time, location / link	
Decision-maker	
What can actually be decided?	
Comment deadline / speaking limit	
Your one-sentence objective	
Best 2-3 facts with source IDs	1. 2. 3.
Key unresolved question	
Specific request / safeguard / action	
Follow-up after meeting	

A simple three-part comment structure

13. State the decision you are addressing and your specific request.
14. Give the two or three strongest documented reasons, naming the underlying records when practical.
15. End with the action, condition, delay, disclosure, study, or safeguard you want the decision-maker to adopt.

ACT

Action Plan worksheet

Turn broad concern into a small number of actions with an owner, deadline, and expected result.

Priority	Action	Owner	Due	Target / recipient	Expected result	Status
High						
High						
Medium						
Medium						
Low						

Useful actions are specific

“Ask the planning director for the traffic-impact study by Friday” is actionable. “Raise awareness about traffic” is not.

TRACK

Commitments & Changes worksheet

Major projects often change. Preserve both the earlier and current representation so the public record does not lose history.

Date	Topic	Earlier representation / commitment	Current representation / outcome	Source IDs	Why the change matters	Follow-up

What to track over time

☐ Project scale, capacity, site boundaries, phases, or technology

☐ Ownership, operator, end user, major contractors, or consultants

☐ Jobs, investment, tax, incentive, or public-benefit claims

☐ Water, power, cooling, traffic, emissions, noise, or infrastructure assumptions

☐ Applications, permits, approvals, hearings, litigation, and enforcement

☐ Promises, conditions, community-benefit commitments, and mitigation measures

☐ Deadlines, implementation milestones, and measurable outcomes

FIRST WEEK

A practical first-week checklist

☐ Complete the Project Snapshot.

☐ Locate the official project application or strongest available primary project record.

☐ Find the next decision date or deadline.

☐ Create a Source Register and save the first 5-10 important sources.

☐ Identify the three most consequential unresolved questions.

☐ Assign one person to each high-priority records request or research task.

☐ Create one Issue Review for the issue most likely to affect the decision.

☐ Prepare for the next meeting using the Meeting & Comment Planner.

☐ Record any major promise, condition, or changing project description.

☐ Schedule a short review after the next significant development.

Common mistakes

Mistake	Better approach
Collecting everything before identifying the next decision	Find the decision/deadline first; research what can still affect it.
Treating every social-media post as evidence	Use posts as leads or evidence of community perspective; verify factual claims separately.
Using only news articles	Use reporting to find the underlying agenda, filing, permit, plan, study, contract, or official statement.
Replacing an old claim when the project changes	Preserve the old representation and document the transition to the new one.
Arguing from conclusions instead of records	Lead with the strongest source, identify uncertainty, then make the policy argument.
Making records requests too broad	Ask for identifiable record categories, time periods, names, sites, case numbers, and file types.
Waiting for perfect knowledge	Work from the best documented record available and keep unresolved questions visible.

WORKED EXAMPLE

How the pieces fit together

This simplified example is fictional. It shows the process, not a conclusion you should copy.

Scenario

A company proposes a 250-acre industrial campus near a school and residential area. The company says the project will create 450 permanent jobs and use a closed-loop cooling system. The county has scheduled a zoning hearing in 18 days. No traffic study or detailed water balance is posted publicly.

Step	Example
Define	Snapshot identifies the site, developer, zoning board, utility, hearing date, and three open questions: jobs basis, traffic, and water.
Investigate	The company website becomes DEV-001. The county application becomes GOV-001. A local news interview is REP-001. The 450-job figure is marked Attributed because it comes from the developer and no staffing study is available.
Records request	Request the application file, traffic studies, utility correspondence, water/cooling documents, staff reviews, and written project conditions for the relevant date range.
Act	Meeting comment asks the zoning board to require the traffic study and water balance before final action and to make any operating conditions enforceable.
Track	Two weeks later the company changes the jobs estimate to 300 and posts a revised site plan. Both versions remain in the source record and the Commitments & Changes sheet records the transition.

Example Claim Check

Field	Example entry
Claim	The project will create 450 permanent jobs.
Who made it?	Developer website, DEV-001.
What is documented?	The developer publicly forecasts 450 permanent jobs.
What is not established?	No staffing plan, job categories, wage schedule, or independent jobs analysis has been located.
Status	Attributed.
Current conclusion	450 permanent jobs is a developer forecast, not a verified employment outcome.
Evidence still needed	Staffing model, operator/end user information, job categories, wage ranges, and any independent economic analysis.

KEEP GOING

Use the tracker when the project becomes ongoing

The Placeward Community Project Tracker workbook is designed to hold the same information in a shared operating record: Project Snapshot, Issues, Claims & Evidence, Source Register, Decisions & Deadlines, Records Requests, Participants, Community Record, Commitments & Changes, and Actions.

The objective

Make it difficult for important facts, deadlines, commitments, contradictions, and unresolved questions to disappear as the project moves forward.

Professional help

This guide is not legal, engineering, environmental, tax, financial, or other professional advice. When a decision depends on statutory deadlines, court procedure, engineering design, environmental modeling, tax structures, or other specialized matters, use the toolkit to organize the record and obtain qualified professional review.