

# The New Laboratories of Democracy:

## How Local Government is Reinventing Civic Engagement



**By Mike McGrath**

**PRESENTED BY PACE**  
Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement

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## Foreword

All over the country, local governments are mobilizing citizens in innovative ways to set priorities, make decisions, overcome conflicts, and solve critical community problems. Local government officials, both elected and appointed, are pioneering a concept called “democratic governance,” the art of governing communities in participatory, deliberative, collaborative ways. For example, as local fiscal conditions continue to spiral downward, many cities are using the opportunity to approach tough, complex and controversial budget decisions by seeking input from the community about their wants and needs, their evaluation of services, and their priorities.

These local innovations are highlighted in this valuable report from PACE, “The New Laboratories of Democracy: How Local Governments are Reinventing Civic Engagement.” The report traces the development of a new set of values among citizens, elected officials and public managers, one that emphasizes collaboration, deliberation, consensus-building and participation. Readers will glean fresh insights from experts and leaders in the emerging field of democratic government and learn of vibrant examples of communities that are trying new approaches to planning and decision-making.

At the National League of Cities, we have shared similar insights through our CityFutures Panel on Democratic Governance, an ongoing effort to help local officials develop and disseminate tools and approaches to governance and civic engagement. As part of this project – which also includes a major survey to better understand city officials’ views and knowledge – NLC has identified principles to help guide leaders as they set out to restore a common-good framework to the crafting of public policies, including:

- *Reaching out through a wide array of groups and organizations is critical for mobilizing large and diverse groups of citizens.*
- *Most public problems cannot be solved without the effort, energy, and ideas of citizens and their organizations.*
- *Large-scale, open-minded deliberation, where citizens consider a range of policy options, results in public decisions that are fairer, more informed, and more broadly supported.*
- *Giving people a sense of status and membership in their community – promotes individual responsibility and leadership.*
- *The process requires that residents not only provide input, but also help implement and support changes, creating a situation where residents engage with local government to protect and advance the needs of the community as a whole.*

I would like to commend PACE for issuing this timely report. As communities continue to face critical challenges and try new approaches to governance, cataloguing and assessing the many myriad new ways local governments are engaging citizens can be of great value to public officials and foundation leaders alike.

Donald J. Borut  
Executive Director  
National League of Cities

## ABOUT PACE

PACE is a learning community of grantmakers and donors committed to strengthening democracy by using the power, influence and resources of philanthropy to open pathways to participation. PACE's mission is to work within the field of philanthropy to inspire interest, understanding and investment in civic engagement, broadly defined.

PACE was founded in 2005 with an intent to bring new philanthropic focus to the issues of civic engagement, democratic renewal and citizen activism. Formerly known as the Grantmakers Forum on Community and National Service, PACE was created to take a broad approach to educating grantmakers about effective civic engagement strategies that strengthen communities and improve our democratic practice.

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## INTRODUCTION

*On behalf of PACE, I am pleased to introduce this report, "The New Laboratories of Democracy: How Local Government is Reinventing Civic Engagement." The past 15 years have seen an amazing burst of fresh thinking and innovation from local governments as they foster a more active and meaningful role for citizens in planning and decision-making. This paper is an effort to capture some of the major changes and lessons from that time, both to help funders better understand how citizens are being engaged by the public sector, and so local governments can learn what their colleagues have done to reinvent the relationship between public officials and the citizens they serve.*

*State and federal agencies have also done their share of innovative work during this time, but local governments are particularly well suited to be laboratories of civic experimentation. City and county officials have a unique ability to convene citizens, and the advantages of proximity, jurisdiction and scale make it possible for planning efforts and public discussions to result in tangible outcomes in neighborhoods, communities and regions.*

*In addition, local government is the place where citizens feel the strongest desire to be heard, and the issues being dealt with are those that literally hit closest to home. Local officials have the responsibility to provide essential services that people from all walks of life depend upon, and if they fail to do so promptly or efficiently, they soon hear about it from a growing network of individuals, neighborhood associations and community-based organizations. Historically, local government's record in providing services or making decisions in an equitable fashion has not been spotless, but in recent decades, many public officials have come to see equity and participation as guiding values that are as important as traditional measures of efficiency and effectiveness. In many communities, mayors, council members and professional administrators have joined the forefront of efforts to develop new grassroots structures and venues for democratic decision-making.*

*This search for authentic, community-based forms of participation, however, did not begin with municipal government. As the report suggests, it dates back to the early 1960s and the anti-poverty initiatives of foundations, nonprofit groups and the federal government. In 1962, the Ford Foundation launched its "Gray Areas" program, which formed locally controlled "community development corporations" to manage and design neighborhood-based projects. These CDCs worked with other organizations and government agencies to improve their communities. When the federal Economic Opportunity Act was passed in 1964, it embraced the idea that new programs should be administered with the "maximum feasible participation" of the people who lived in areas to be served.*

*By the 1970s, cities began to experiment with decentralized neighborhood councils and priority boards designed to engage and involve larger numbers of citizens in the day-to-day processes of governing. During the 1990s, a variety of trends and conditions led to the development of temporary ad hoc organiz-*

*ing and planning efforts. The effectiveness of grassroots organizing techniques, combined with increasing levels of citizen distrust, coincided with a renewed interest in dialogue and deliberation, comprehensive community-building programs and environmental activism.*

*Today, technological change is a driving force and a big unknown in the future of civic engagement and experimentation. The Internet gives citizens instant access to a wide range of information and provides new avenues for grassroots organizing and public policy discussion. Web-based “citizen journalists” are adding new, if often discordant, voices to the marketplace of ideas, while government agencies are finding ways to use the Internet to inform and engage citizens. Social networking tools are being applied to communities in ways we could not have imagined even five years ago.*

*Members of the philanthropic community have an important role to play in guiding this loosely connected, evolving field of civic engagement. That community’s direct support for specific local experiments has been invaluable, not to mention its assistance to nonprofits, community organizations, public sector associations and government agencies seeking to develop and hone new tools, techniques and forms of evaluation. As advocates of public participation and deliberative democracy often point out, healthy democracies depend on the ability of all sectors—public, private and nonprofit—to forge creative alliances and successful collaborative initiatives. And as this report indicates, many of these alliances and initiatives are made possible through the support of philanthropy.*

*PACE commissioned this report on local innovation and change to further its mission of advancing the cause of civic engagement within the philanthropic sector. Dozens of public officials, both elected and appointed, as well as funders, scholars, community activists, nonprofit managers and facilitators were interviewed over a period of months in an effort to catalogue and assess these new approaches to public participation.*

*This report was produced with support from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, and PACE thanks that organization for its support in this effort and in the work of our organization. I would also like to thank the many local officials, academics, foundation executives, program officers, social entrepreneurs and community activists who responded to requests for interviews, information and feedback. I hope this report will stimulate new thinking, in both the world of philanthropy and the world of local government, on the future of civic engagement and help spread the word about existing successful examples of innovation and change.*

*Christopher T. Gates  
Executive Director  
Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement*



## Laboratories of Democracy



Louis Brandeis once described state legislatures as the “laboratories of democracy,” an idea author David Osborne borrowed for the title of an influential book on government innovation in the late 1980s. The beauty of the Brandeis theory, wrote Osborne, was that new ideas could be tested on a limited scale “to see if they work, and to see if they sell” before being imposed on the entire nation.<sup>1</sup> Imagine the possibilities, then, if instead of 50 laboratories there were tens of thousands, or, to be more precise, 19,279 municipalities, 16,656 towns and townships, 3043 counties and 27 consolidated city/counties.

In fact, it doesn’t take much imagination. All over the country you can find vivid examples of civic innovation at the local government level. For instance, community-wide “visioning” or “strategic planning” projects have led to dramatic reversals of fortune for small, struggling cities. Decentralized governing structures have recalibrated the balance

of power between powerful downtown interests and once-neglected, older neighborhoods. Planning “charrettes” and deliberative dialogues have led to observable changes in the look and feel of towns, villages, cities and counties.

In his book, *The Next Form of Democracy*, Matt Leighninger describes “the most dramatic change in the structure of local government” since the Progressive Era, a transformation he views as both thrilling and terrifying. “It is likely to be a painful transition, as citizens and public servants negotiate new rules for their relationship,” he notes. “But it also represents the opportunity of a lifetime as we shape and are shaped by these changes, to establish forms of governance that are efficient and egalitarian, deliberative and decisive. It is a chance to renovate and revitalize the level of government that most directly affects the lives of ordinary people.”<sup>2</sup>

## The Vending Machine and the Barn

Ventura, California, City Manager Rick Cole compares the old and new styles of governing to the difference between a vending machine and a barn-raising. “With a vending machine, you put your money in and you get services out,” says Cole, a former alternative newspaper publisher and mayor in Pasadena. “When government doesn’t deliver, they do what people do when a vending machine doesn’t deliver,” says Cole. “They kick the machine.”<sup>3</sup>

“The more useful metaphor,” he adds, “is the barn raising. It’s not a transaction, where I pay you to do work on my behalf, but a collaborative process where we are working together. Government works better and costs less when citizens do more than simply choose or ratify representative decision-makers.”

Cole cites an example from his own city to illustrate what he means. Several years ago, the city decided to enforce an ordinance against sleeping in the dry bed of the Ventura River, a favorite camping spot for homeless people since the days of “hobo jungles” and the Great Depression.

“It seemed to me that the responsibility to remove people from the riverbed was mine and the police powers of the city,” says Cole, “but the responsibility for what put people in the riverbed was broader than city government. We framed this as a challenge to the community: by December 1st we were going to enforce this law, so let’s all work together to take this problem apart.”

The city invited and recruited an audience of about 350 people for a meeting facilitated by someone who wasn’t connected to the city to make it clear, in Cole’s words, “that this was a community process, not a government process. We were there to support the community’s consensus. Those people in the audience were the deliberative body. Their job was to come up with something that would make sense to the community. The city was the partner, not the decider.”

In the end, it was not a government official, a “stakeholder” or one of those “professional citizens” who often show up at public meetings, but a local artist

### *Better Decision-making Practices in Northampton*

*After a series of contentious planning decisions, citizens in Northampton, Massachusetts asked the city government to conduct an extensive review of its public outreach and decision-making processes.*

*The city council voted to create an “Ad Hoc Committee for Best Practices in Northampton Decision-Making” consisting of three city councilors and four citizens. The committee’s charge was to “create and oversee a public process for reviewing municipal decision-making” and to make recommendations to the city council ensuring the use of “locally and nationally accepted best practices” in the community.*

*The committee developed a mission statement and other policy documents outlining how it would proceed. Over a period of months, the committee invited public input by holding public forums and receiving input through a website and a Google user’s group, conducted “inreach” by interviewing city officials and surveying boards and committees and conducted research on existing practices locally and “best practices” in other cities across the U.S. and Canada.*

*In December of 2008, the committee came out with a set of recommendations, including creating a citizen’s guide to city government, better adapting the city’s website for public education and communication, hiring a public information staff person or ombudsperson, adopting a more collaborative relationship between government and neighborhood groups and slowing down or restarting decision-making processes “if public outreach/input is incomplete or unsuccessful.”*

<http://www.northamptonma.gov/bestpractices/>

with a studio near the river who spoke up and said, “You know, what you guys ought to do is start your own camp somewhere.”

The Turning Point Foundation stepped forward to be the fiscal agent, and the city made available some land near the harbor for what came to be known as “River Haven,” a self-governing tent village with more than two dozen residents. The rules are clear—no drugs or alcohol, for instance, and there is an elected council that enforces them.

The goal is for residents to transition out of the camp into some form of low income housing, but, for now, River Haven seems to be working. “Four years later, and there’s still a community in existence,” says Cole. “It’s a remarkable success story of what civic engagement can do.”

## Forms of Innovation

In recent years, some cities have formally adopted the language of civic engagement. In Ventura, for example, Cole replaced his marketing and communications department with a “Civic Engagement Division.” Up the coast in Palo Alto, the city council voted to make civic engagement one of its top four priorities in 2008, along with such nuts and bolts objectives as economic development and building a new community center.

William Johnson, the former mayor of Rochester, New York, earned accolades from urban planners for the Neighbors Building Neighborhoods program he initiated in 1994. The city’s 37 neighborhoods were organized into ten planning “sectors.” Each sector formed a stakeholders committee of business groups and local nonprofit organizations. The sectors maintained their involvement in citywide planning efforts, helping to set priorities for capital improvements, budgets and the distribution of funds from community development block grants. An NBN priority council was created to serve as a liaison between city government departments and the sectors.

It isn’t necessary, however, for a city to create a new department or adopt an official name change to be part of this vast experiment in democratic governance. In Northampton, Massachusetts, city government created an Ad Hoc Committee on Best Practices in Decision Making, pulling models and case studies from other cities throughout the country. In Fort Wayne, Indiana, the mayor took an existing community policing program and expanded it to what is now called “community oriented government.”

## Why Innovate?

Some public officials try new forms of civic engagement because of a sincere belief in grassroots democracy. Others do it from a sense of professionalism and a desire to keep up with the latest trends in public administration. In most cases, however, local officials have learned to make necessity a virtue. Citizens are less deferential than they were thirty years ago, and—thanks to generations of community organizers and civil rights activists—there are a lot more chairs at the table when it comes time to make a public decision.

Others embrace civic engagement to “share” a tough decision on where and how to cut the city budget. “We’ve learned that citizens talking together as peers do a better job of changing each others’ minds than a staff person or an elected official,” says Robin Beltramini, a member of the Troy, Michigan City Council, and former chair of the National League of Cities Panel on Democratic Governance. “Once they’ve chatted together and reached an understanding, even if they didn’t get it all their way they understand why they didn’t or why this compromise was in the interests of most.”<sup>4</sup>

The need to get “buy-in” from a wary public on, say, a bond issue or a controversial development project is often a factor. “More and more these days you have to campaign for change during the planning process,” says Denver City Council member Michael Hancock. “And what I mean by that is that if a public school system is challenged and needs to go for a bond issue, you campaign for that change by engaging the citizens. It’s the old cliché. People support what they create.”<sup>5</sup>

Whatever the source of motivation, this wave of civic innovation represents a big change in attitudes from the early 1960s when urban mayors complained about federal anti-poverty programs circumventing the official channels of government to empower grassroots organizers and community-based planning boards. It is also a change from the late 1970s, when a group of city managers reportedly walked out of the room during a presentation on collaborative governance by the president of a national nonprofit organization.<sup>6</sup>



John Nalbandian, chairman the University of Kansas's Department of Public Administration, describes a noticeable change in the values of city managers between 1980 and 1990. What emerged, he says, was a "clear sense of the city manager as community builder." Being a community builder involved different aspects of the job, one of which was recognizing that citizen engagement meant more than holding a public hearing or two. "They got the message," says Nalbandian, "so now it's more a question of, what are some of the alternatives." <sup>7</sup>

### Better Conversations in Sarasota County, Florida

To improve the quality of public discussion about controversial issues, three area foundations joined forces with local government to create an independent nonprofit called Sarasota County Openly Plans for Excellence (SCOPE).

SCOPE has convened dialogues on such issues as traffic and congestion, affordable housing, school dropout rates, mental health, family violence and community change. SCOPE also measures and reports on indicators of community vibrancy and health.

Stewart Stearns, CEO of the Community Foundation of Sarasota County, says working with SCOPE has changed the way his organization does business. In fact, the foundation considers SCOPE's studies and indicators so valuable it is bending its rule against operational funding to ensure that SCOPE is funded annually.

"Our goal in life is to support causes that matter in the community," says Stearns, one of the founders of SCOPE. "How do we know unless we go ask? Suddenly we could gauge what the community interests were and associate that with where we should focus our grant dollars."

## Philanthropy, Local Government and Civic Innovation

Foundations have played a leading role in fostering some of these changes. The aforementioned anti-poverty programs were directly influenced by the Ford Foundation's "gray areas" and community development programs. More recently, a consortium of foundations played an instrumental role in the success of one of the most ambitious and complicated public planning processes in history, the effort to develop a Unified New Orleans Plan after Hurricane Katrina.

Foundations provide much needed support for non-profit organizations that work in communities. They fund academic research on existing democratic governance projects and assist public sector associations and schools of public administration.

Foundations partner directly with local government and community organizations looking for better ways to empower citizens. An obvious way philanthropy can encourage civic innovation is by defraying the cost of "cutting edge" tools and techniques public officials and taxpayers might view as exotic or nonessential. Even as accepted a practice as having trained facilitators may seem luxurious to cash strapped municipalities, according to Robin Beltramini.

In Lincoln, Nebraska, the president of the local community foundation got an unexpected phone call from the mayor. Faced with a fiscal crisis and the likelihood of severe budget cuts, city government partnered with the local newspaper on a citizen-informed budget process called "Priority Lincoln: We're Listening." Local officials had balked at using taxpayer money for the proposed "deliberative poll" to be conducted by the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center.

These partnerships have potential benefits for both sides. "We saw this as a clear strategic opportunity for the community to move to a different approach to budgeting based on citizen input," says Lincoln Community Foundation Interim CEO Bob Harris, who agreed to fund the deliberative poll. In return, the pollsters agreed to include some questions about

community attitudes on what the foundation's priorities should be. The results of the poll, says Harris, should give the foundation a better idea of what citizens want from philanthropy.

## Municipal Reformers and Urban Renewal

The importance of philanthropic leadership is more than financial. Some of these new ideas about shared decision-making and citizen-based planning go against the grain of an old-fashioned belief that "making the tough decisions" is an important part of a public official's qualifications for the job. There is something to be said for Harry Truman's saying that "the buck stops here," but sharing isn't the same as passing the buck.

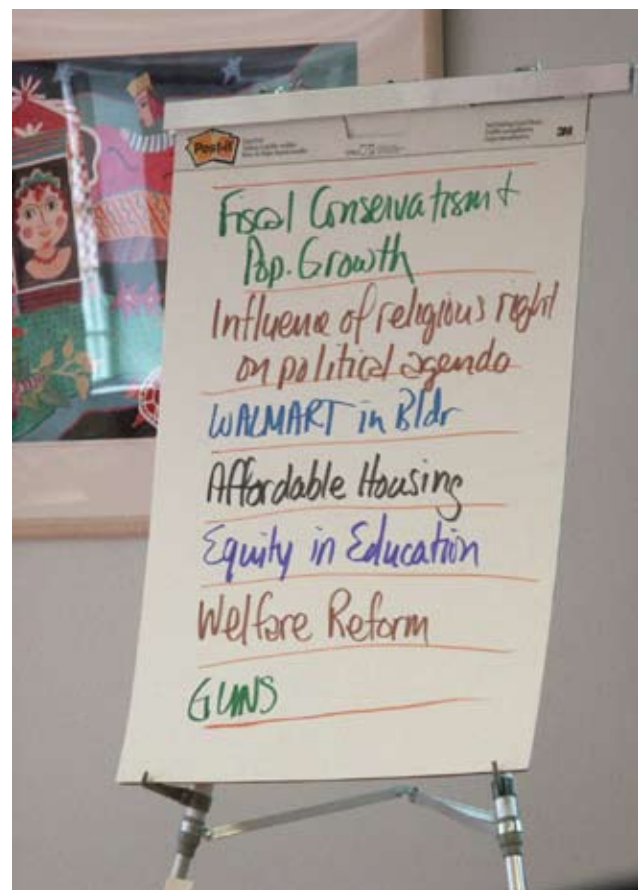
"The issues that really matter to citizens cross all kinds of boundaries," says Robert O'Neill, executive director of the International City/County Management Association. "Getting more ownership, more commitment and more engagement in the processes themselves substantially increases the likelihood of a good decision and a successful outcome."<sup>8</sup>

The emphasis on professionalism, expertise and clear lines of authority in local government goes back to the late nineteenth century and one of the most successful reform movements in American history. Progressive Era municipal reformers rebelled against a Jacksonian system of ward-based patronage regimes run by amateurs and party bosses. To encourage efficiency and fight corruption, they abolished the unwieldy aldermanic councils with their dozens of members, reduced the number of directly elected administrative offices and centralized policy making and administration along clear lines of accountability and authority.

These structural reforms made local government more efficient, transparent, professional and less corrupt, but at what cost? Critics note that voting rates declined dramatically in the early twentieth century. Some even suggest that the intent of "middle class reformers" was to discourage public participation, particularly among immigrants, minorities and poorly educated voters.

It is certainly true that "at-large" voting for city council members, a tenet of the reform Model City Charter, made it very difficult for small minorities to elect their own city council or school board members. On the other hand, the original reform charter also called for the "single transferable vote" form of proportional representation, which would have increased minority representation and did so in those few cities that tried it

There is little doubt, however, that by the 1960s the version of the reform model adopted by most cities was itself in need of reforming. In many communities, grassroots organizers and civil rights activists viewed city councils and city managers as the captives of a powerful "downtown business establishment."



## Maximum Feasible Participation

It didn't help matters that local, state and federal urban policies during the post World War II era effectively ignored the needs of older, inner city neighborhoods and low-income residents. The spurs, loops and interchanges of the newly developed US Highway system bypassed or bisected existing towns and neighborhoods, leaving them isolated, neglected and cut off from both commerce and pedestrian traffic. Low interest mortgages for World War II veterans subsidized suburban sprawl and drained older urban areas of jobs, population and revenues.

The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 reflected new thinking about empowerment and participation by critics of the old top-down planning processes. Community Action Program (CAP) boards were to be "developed, conducted, and administered with the maximum feasible participation of the residents of the areas and members of the groups served." <sup>9</sup> In theory, at least, these CAP boards represented the devolution of power and money away from municipal bureaucracies and toward a new group of political players--neighborhood leaders, civil rights leaders and reform-minded civic activists.

Though in practice these structures weren't always well represented by the urban poor, CAP board and Model City programs helped develop a new generation of community leaders committed to new ideas about grassroots local decision-making and neighborhood empowerment. Some would go on to become city planners and elected officials.

During the 1980s, "relational organizing" groups such as the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) and the Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO) began to emerge as powerful institutions in urban communities. Inspired by the theories of community organizer Saul Alinsky, these groups adopted a style of politics that was both confrontational and creative, rallying citizens around neighborhoods and parishes to make demands on local business leaders and public officials. <sup>10</sup>

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City officials were often accused of neglecting neighborhoods in favor of ambitious economic development schemes, leading advocacy groups and neighborhood organizers to mount political challenges against the "downtown business establishment." Groups like COPS (Communities Organized for Public Service) in San Antonio, Texas, formed local organizing efforts to demand more attention to the low-income neighborhoods and to eliminate "at large" elections in favor of districts or wards that better represented the social and ethnic diversity of cities.

## Permanent Neighborhood Structures



In their book, *Better Together*, Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein note the dramatic increase in civic activity in Portland, Oregon after 1974 when the mayor created an Office of Neighborhood Associations. Before that decision, Portland was no more civically active than the average city. “Over the next two decades, however, a gulf steadily widened between Portland, which experienced an extraordinary civic renaissance, and the rest of the country, which slumped slowly into isolated passivity,” they write. “Elsewhere in America in the 1970s and 1980s...public meetings emptied, local organizations atrophied, and ‘good government’ groups expired. In Portland, by contrast, in these same years, civic activism boomed.”<sup>11</sup>

In 1974, about 21 percent of Portland residents had attended at least one public meeting in the past year as compared to 22 percent nationally. By the early 1990s, the rest of the country had dropped to about 11 percent, but Portland had risen to 30-35 percent. Rates of writing letters to the local newspaper were also higher in Portland (17 percent to 4). Portlanders were more than three times as likely to be involved in a good government group and four times as likely to serve as an officer or committee member in a local organization. “In Portland, government officials have evolved a culture of adaptation and accommodation. Just as citizens honed their civic skills

and vociferously pressed their views, government developed a culture of responding to and learning from, rather than rejecting many grassroots initiatives,” concluded Putnam and Feldstein.

In Matt Leighninger’s view, the field of democratic governance can be divided into two primary forms of activity, “temporary organizing efforts and permanent neighborhood structures.” The best of both categories, he writes, “effect change in a number of ways: by applying citizens’ input to policy and planning decisions, by encouraging change within organizations and institutions, by creating teams to work on particular action ideas, by inspiring and connecting individual volunteers, or all of the above.”<sup>12</sup>

*By the early 1970s, a number of large cities had developed decentralized, neighborhood-based participatory structures to accommodate the emerging power of grassroots organizers and civil rights/social justice groups.*

Though some of these early experiments failed, others were more successful. In a study for the Brookings Institution, Jeffrey M. Berry, Kent E. Portney and Ken Thomson took a long look at five communities that had successfully adopted formal neighborhood decision-making structures: Birmingham, Alabama;



Portland, Oregon; San Antonio, Texas; St. Paul, Minnesota and Dayton, Ohio. The neighborhood associations in these cities had “proven themselves to be responsible, thoughtful, organizations,” concluded the authors. Rather than damaging or hampering the functionality of local government, as skeptics had warned, they had “enhanced the livability of their communities.”<sup>13</sup>

## The Second Wave

A second wave of structural changes appeared in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Chicago’s Alternative Policing Strategy (CAPS) brought neighborhood groups directly into the process of determining priorities and planning by the local police department. The city was divided into 280 neighborhood beats with one patrol car assigned to each. Interested residents of the area

### Community-Oriented Government in Fort Wayne, Indiana

*After the success of a community-oriented policing initiative in 1994, city officials assembled a task force to increase citizen interaction with other city departments.*

*The result was known as “community-oriented government” (COG). Four area partnerships consisting of 30 to 60 neighborhood associations met monthly with city staff to deal with problems and neighborhood needs. These partnerships also acted independently, inviting speakers, holding discussions and planning and implementing programs in their respective neighborhoods.*

*The neighborhood groups were asked to list five priorities, for instance, vacant houses, overgrown lots, or problems between landlords and tenants. City staff used the five priorities to focus municipal resources.*

*The COG approach has been continued by successive Fort Wayne mayors. Says Denise Porter-Ross, a liaison between the mayor’s office and the city’s northeast quadrant: “In Fort Wayne, no one is that far from being able to have the ear of government. Government is coming to you once a month, so you don’t have to go downtown.”*

would attend monthly “community beat meetings” at which citizens and police would deliberate on the problems and prioritize and develop strategies to address those problems. Implementation of those strategies would be shared between police officers and citizens. At the next meeting, they would assess how those strategies were working.

In his book, *Empowered Participation*, Archon Fung noted that crime statistics improved significantly after the implementation of the citizen-based strategy. Between 1995 and 2000, the number of murders in Chicago decreased by 23 percent and other violent crimes dropped by 29 percent.<sup>14</sup> Of course, crime statistics also went down in other cities during that period, partly because of demographics, and they went down even more dramatically in New York, where a sophisticated computerized tracking system known as CompStat was implemented. Nevertheless, his findings suggested “troubled public agencies such as urban police departments and school systems can become more responsive, fair, innovative and effective by incorporating empowered participation and deliberation into their governance structures.”<sup>15</sup>

### Matching Funds and Little City Halls

In the late 1980s, Seattle, Washington, established a Department of Neighborhoods which created a system of “13 little city halls” to provide a neighborhood connection to local government. Court magistrates, police and a range of city services were accessible through these 13 offices, along with neighborhood planning staff and a coordinator to serve as a link between the community and government.

Seattle Mayor Paul Schell also created a Neighborhood Matching Fund to provide support for community self-help projects. Under the innovative program, neighborhood groups could apply for an equal match of any contributions they could raise themselves or from local philanthropies, whether cash, in kind services, donated materials or volunteer labor. According to city officials, the matching fund program:



- Dramatically increased the number of citizens active in their communities;
- Developed better relationships between citizens and city staff;
- Brought more resources to under-served neighborhoods; and
- Helped neighborhood organizations move from being reactive to taking more responsibility.

Seattle's experience, notes author and Brandeis University professor Carmen Sirianni, suggests several lessons about neighborhood planning:

- 1) That local officials should make a clear commitment to neighborhood plans from the start;
- 2) mayors should show leadership so staff and departments understand the importance of working closely with neighborhoods on an everyday basis;
- 3) the system should receive an adequate budget to provide support staff in their roles as "relational organizers and intermediaries of trust"; and
- 4) design and implementation should be supported by state-of-the-art support systems, including GIS and visualization tools.<sup>16</sup>

*To avoid parochialism and turf battles, Lukensmeyer recommends having citywide summits, so every neighborhood entity is thinking about the good of the whole.*

## Getting it Right

As Putnam, Fung, Portney, et al and others have demonstrated, neighborhood structures can change both the qualitative and quantitative connection between citizens and government, but they have to be well-structured and well thought out. Some advocates of democratic governance view the experience with neighborhood councils in Los Angeles as a cautionary tale. In the wake of an extensive charter review process in Los Angeles, then Mayor Jim Hahn launched a neighborhood council system to monitor the delivery of city services and make budget recommendations. Within four years, 90 councils had been established within the city. Some of the councils have worked well, but overall the

experiment has not been viewed as an unqualified success. Controversy and disorder have characterized some council meetings.

But Terry Cooper, a professor at the USC's School of Policy, Planning and Development, says the verdict is not yet in. "I think it is a mixed bag at this point," he says, "but I keep cautioning patience. This is an extraordinary experiment and an incredible thing to undertake. The neighborhood councils are not across the board as representative of diversity as they should be, but that's always a problem. The quality of the partnerships has improved. People feel they have a friend in city hall that they didn't have before." The problem, he says, has been the lack of capacity (in terms of time and staff support) among neighborhood groups to comprehend and respond to these service plans.<sup>17</sup>

AmericaSpeaks president Carolyn Lukensmeyer served as interim executive director of Mayor Anthony Williams' civic engagement initiatives in Washington, D.C. during the late 1990s. "You have to have in place the appropriate interagency mechanisms so that the budget priorities become part of the annual budget process in every relevant agency across the city, not just the agency designated to be connected to the neighborhood councils," she says.<sup>18</sup>

In other words, the parks and recreation department, the police, codes and safety inspection—each of their annual budgets must reflect the priorities of the neighborhoods. Otherwise, the neighborhood staff will have to go begging to the other departments once budgets have been passed by the administration.

To avoid parochialism and turf battles, Lukensmeyer recommends having citywide summits, so every neighborhood entity is thinking about the good of the whole. "What's inspiring about our work," she says, "is that if you invite people so they are all in the same room, the vast majority of citizens want to be inclusive."

*Recruiting is a continuous challenge, and with the aging of the Baby Boomer generation, cities and neighborhood groups will have to find new ways to appeal to a new generation of leaders who may not have the same commitment to place or patience of face-to-face meetings as their elders.*

## Beyond the Neighborhood

Is the neighborhood always the best unit for citizen engagement? Neighborhood groups can become turf-oriented and exclusive. “There are some examples of very vibrant neighborhood associations,” says Judith Mowry of the City of Portland’s Office of Neighborhood Involvement (formerly the Office of Neighborhood Associations), “but there has been a lot of growth and they tend to end up being white homeowners who are not very good at engaging diverse communities.” Mowry is quick to add, “Show me where this is done well, because I think there is a huge challenge around that.”<sup>19</sup>

Portland recently conducted an extensive audit of its civic engagement programs called “Community Connect.” One of the recommendations was to look beyond the neighborhood as an organizing principle for participation. “The conversation evolved into the fact that the neighborhood system itself may not have the capacity to meet our civic engagement needs and we’re looking at new ways of bringing in under-represented groups,” says Mowry.

Another problem with neighborhood groups is civic burnout. Leaders can only attend so many meetings and fight so many fights before fatigue sets in. Recruiting is a continuous challenge, and with the aging of the Baby Boomer generation, cities and neighborhood groups will have to find new ways to appeal to a new generation of leaders who may not have the same commitment to place or patience with face-to-face meetings as their elders. “In these older neighborhoods, the leadership is now getting older and not as able to be active,” says Larry Washington, senior director of neighborhood initiatives for Kansas City Neighborhood Alliance. “Part of our goal is to bring out the emerging leadership, the younger folks who want to take a leadership role and help train them so they can become leaders.”<sup>20</sup>

Finally, there is the issue of sustainability. To effectively decentralize power in large cities, governments have to put money on the table and allow neighborhood groups to decide how best to use it. But many cities are in a state of semi-permanent fiscal crisis and have to face tough choices about where and how to cut budgets. With pressing issues such as gang violence and failing schools, the current mayor of Rochester is considering cutting back on the city’s impressive Neighbors Building Neighborhoods program, according to former City Council President Lois Geiss, who worries that some neighborhood groups will be unable to benefit from the program in the future.

“I think there would be less of the neighborhood planning,” says Geiss. “I hope it doesn’t lead to bunker mentality where we just hunker down rather than get excited. It doesn’t take a lot of money to excite a neighborhood when they have some planning money to get together and figure out what they might like to see happening in the neighborhood.”<sup>21</sup>

Cities with strong mayor forms of government are particularly susceptible to priority changes when a new administration comes in. Seattle’s neighborhood planning program is a case in point. The current mayor doesn’t have the same interest in neighborhood based structures as Norm Rice or Paul Schell. “With a change of administration, budget issues, the softer stuff is often the first to get cut,” notes Carmen Sirianni. Making the programs work can be dependent on availability of resources and political will.<sup>22</sup>



## Temporary Planning and Decision-making Forums



There are many different theories to explain why some communities seem to work better than others. Robert Putnam popularized an obscure social scientific concept known as “social capital” in his book *Bowling Alone*. Terry Woodbury has a slightly different way of looking at the question, using the image of a public square. It consists, in his view, of four quadrants: 1) business, 2) government, 3) education, and 4) health and human services. In his experience, a community isn’t healthy unless each of these quadrants is functioning in sync with the others.<sup>23</sup>

Four years ago, the neighborhood organizer-turned nonprofit executive set off across the state of Kansas on a personal fact finding tour. After interviewing hundreds of local leaders, he quit his job at the United Way of Wyandotte County and started his own consulting firm, Kansas Communities, LLC and took on an ambitious mission of “rebuilding the public square in Kansas, one community at a time.” Among the first community leaders to call him in was Mike Thon, a local commissioner from Greeley County. The county had been losing popu-

lation and economic vitality. It had been suffering from a severe drought. It had lost 30 percent of its school population in seven years, and businesses were closing. “There was a real defeated attitude,” notes the county’s community development director, Christy Hopkins. “People were starting to give up hope that the community was going to make a comeback.”

Woodbury’s modus operandi is to begin a community process by interviewing local leaders to find out about the community and to identify conveners. The next step is to hold a communitywide meeting. At the first meeting, nearly 12 percent of the county’s population showed up to brainstorm community improvement ideas. “Terry’s mantra is that positive conversation changes the world,” says Hopkins. “So for a night, no one was allowed to say negative things.”

The group nominated about 30 members to attend a retreat to produce a vision for the community and come up with four or five goals that are reached through a consensus. The next step was to create



*Thirty years ago, the primary vehicle for citizen participation—other than voting—was the public hearing, a superficial form of expression that was often as frustrating for citizens as for public officials.*

action teams, consisting of four or five members who represent each of the four quadrants of the public square. After six months, another public meeting was held in which the action teams interacted with the citizens to lay out what proved to be a successful plan for economic recovery and community development focusing on the county's strengths, its position as a healthcare provider for the area.

## Beyond the Public Hearing

Thirty years ago, the primary vehicle for citizen participation—other than voting—was the public hearing, a superficial form of expression that was often as frustrating for citizens as for public officials. In fact, the very term “public hearing” is considered by many civic experts to be something of a misnomer. “Out of everything that happens at a public hearing,” Dan Kemmis, a former mayor of Missoula, Montana, once wrote, “the emoting, the attempts to persuade the decision-maker, the presentation of facts, the one element that is almost totally lacking is anything that might be characterized as public hearing.”<sup>24</sup>

Too often the decision has already been made, or its outcome is a foregone conclusion, and the “hearing,” if you could call it that, is little more than a public ritual, with, to paraphrase one former assistant town manager, “plenty of engagement, and plenty of enragement.” “Public hearings don’t really contribute a great deal to problem solving,” says John Nalbandian. “They tend to be expressions of opinion, expressions of passion, expressions of preferences, but with no dialogue.”<sup>25</sup>

Dialogue, in the words of Martha McCoy and Patrick Scully, is “constructive communication, the dispelling of stereotypes, honesty in relaying ideas, and the intention to listen and understand the other.” Dialogue alone, however, is not sufficient, according to McCoy and Scully. “A related process, deliberation, brings a different benefit—the use of critical think-

ing and reasoned argument as a way for citizens to make decisions on public policy,” they write.<sup>26</sup>

The call for a more “deliberative” form of democracy has echoes of a long ago debate between two of the country’s top thinkers, journalist Walter Lippmann and philosopher John Dewey. Lippmann doubted that ordinary citizens were competent to make informed judgments about complex and often very technical policy choices, and he laid out his argument with convincing logic and elegant prose in a book, *Public Opinion*. Reading the book, Dewey was deeply troubled, admitting that it was one of the most devastating critiques of popular government ever penned. His answer came in a brilliant book called *The Public and Its Problems*.<sup>27</sup>

*For Dewey the solution was not to exclude citizens, but to increase public knowledge through education and dialogues that took place in democratic “neighborly” communities.*

Dewey agreed that social, economic and technological changes were complicating the problem of democracy, but Lippmann’s idea of limiting the public’s role in decision-making to the mere act of selecting leaders had one great disadvantage: it robbed policy-makers of the unique perspectives that ordinary citizens brought to the table. For Dewey the solution was not to exclude citizens, but to increase public knowledge through education and dialogues that took place in democratic “neighborly” communities. Like Dewey, contemporary advocates of deliberative democracy argue that citizens are competent if they engage one another, leaders and experts in deliberative processes that lead to greater “public knowledge.”

Typically, effective public meetings or dialogues use facilitators, either volunteers or professionals who have been trained in the art of public conversation. These facilitators may come from a variety of disciplines—conflict resolution, planning, engineering, leadership training and organizational development or they may be citizens who have received training.

## Dining and Dialogue in DeSoto, Texas

Recognizing that the demographic composition of this “bedroom” community south of Dallas was changing, the city council and local volunteers launched a series of dinner table conversations to encourage candid and open discussions about diversity-related community issues.

The first DeSoto Dining and Dialogue was held on Martin Luther King Jr. Day in 2004. The hosts invited participants into their home and provided dinner. Trained facilitators posed questions to get the ball rolling, questions that might be avoided during an ordinary conversation. For example: How would you define diversity? What was your first encounter with racism? What can we do as individuals to address the challenges associated with diversity in DeSoto?

The program has since evolved into a nonprofit corporation run by citizen volunteers. Backed by the city council and supported with grants from residents and businesses, the organization hosts three forums per year, or a total of about twenty-five tables.

<http://www.ci.desoto.tx.us/index.asp?NID=739>

## Ongoing Conversations

A number of advocacy and practitioner groups have emerged to help communities hold better conversations, including Everyday Democracy (formerly the Study Circles Resource Center), AmericaSpeaks, Public Agenda, the National Issues Forum, Choice Dialogues, the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, and the Deliberative Democracy Consortium. Adding to that list are the many proprietary consulting and planning firms that offer help on a fee for service basis.

Some efforts that start as one-time only conversations develop into ongoing structures. What began in Portsmouth, New Hampshire as an effort to mobilize parents and students to deal with issues of bullying and violence in schools developed into a permanent organization after city manager John Bohenko suggested using the “study circles” process

to review the city’s master plan, the document that guides policy on such issues as development, open space protection, affordable housing, transportation and infrastructure needs.

The all-volunteer organizing groups came to be known as Portsmouth Listens. The process works this way: the small group, consensus-based discussions of 8-12 people take place over a four-week period, meeting once a week. Then they produce a written report on their findings which is published in the local paper, the *Portsmouth Herald*. The master plan involved over 400 citizens over a period of two years. The process led to the development of a visioning statement and set of recommendations adopted by city government.

Portsmouth Listens has also held candidate forums using a dialogue-based roundtable to allow meaningful interaction between voters and candidates. Portsmouth Listens co-chair Jim Noucas, a local attorney, says study circles have changed the way citizens and local government leaders do business. The city is much more likely to consult the public on issues before evaluating the solutions, and the public





is much more likely to support solutions that have been developed through deliberation. “It’s not just showing up and giving your opinion,” he says. “You have to be able to work with others, and people walk away with their opinions changed.”<sup>28</sup>

## Citizen-Based Planning and Design Processes

A popular tool among planners, architects and design professionals is a one-time only process known as a “charrette.” The word (French for cart) is borrowed from the Ecoles des Beaux-Arts in Paris during the nineteenth century. Architecture students would be working frantically on their final drawings and the proctor would wheel a charrette/cart around the building to collect their work. In American communities the term has come to mean an intensive, interdisciplinary planning or design process involving both professionals and interested members of the public.

Neighborhood groups in Rochester, New York, have organized planning charrettes with technical support from city government and Rochester Regional Community Design Center, a local nonprofit organization. These sessions would take place over a six-hour period on a Saturday, after six months of planning. Neighborhood leaders would divide themselves into groups of six to eight and walk the neighborhood streets in order to get ideas for projects. Then they would work with architects and planners to develop specific plans.

“It could be grandiose, or it could be pretty mundane, like narrowing the street or putting in a pocket park or dress up a façade,” says former city council president Lois Geiss. “They would present their idea to the larger group and generally the architects would take those plans and try to give some coherence to them.”

Frank Benest was the city manager in Brea, California, when the city used a weekend charrette to plan and redevelop its mostly vacant, deteriorating downtown area. In this case, the purpose was to develop a vision of what they wanted the downtown to look like. “Every organization in town identified

### **Civic Regionalism in St. Louis, Missouri**

*A massive “greenway” of biking trails to encircle the St. Louis region was first proposed in the 1990s, but the ambitious project didn’t come together until 2003, when the Great Rivers Greenway District (GRG) undertook a ten-month, citizen planning process.*

*Despite their recreational and environmental benefits, greenway projects can be difficult to sell. Residents who live along the proposed greenway may object, fearing that outsiders will come into their neighborhoods and violate their privacy.*

*The GRG hired a staff of facilitators with people skills to organize a citizen advisory committee to provide an open planning process in which citizens to voice their goals and concerns, and a technical advisory committee to provide commercial, cultural, educational, environmental, and governmental expertise.*

*St. Louis’s metro region now has the nation’s first bi-state, multi-county park districts to develop a regional, interconnected system of greenways, parks, and trails. The GRG is developing trails for the 600-mile-long-river ring in Missouri. Another agency, the Metro East Park and Recreation District, is focused on extending existing trails in Illinois.*

*Since the completion of the River Ring plan, over 75 municipal and government entities have become partners in the project.*

<http://www.greatrivers.info/Projects/TheRiverRing.aspx>

a rep to serve on the charrette. When we saw there was a gap in who was involved we recruited some people. It was very successful.”<sup>29</sup>

The program featured a variety of speakers discussing what communities all over the country were doing to revitalize their downtown areas, including such things as festivals, waterways, greenbelts and public art. Later, small groups were organized to discuss what they had learned. By the end of the day, the group agreed on a list of consensus and non-consensus items that came out of their discussion.

City staff members met with members of the resource team to translate the ideas into a “conceptual plan” for downtown Brea. Benest credits the use of a charrette with breaking an impasse between citizens and city officials on how to redevelop the downtown district.

## Visioning and Strategic Planning

During the early 1990s, cities such as Chattanooga, Phoenix and Charlotte began to mount ambitious, citizen-based strategic planning processes convening hundreds and, in some cases, thousands of “stakeholders” to develop a better plan for the future. A familiar pattern emerged: the community would come together on a common “vision” of what they wanted the city or town to look like in 20 years and form an implementation committee to make that vision a reality.

Strategic planning should not be confused with more technical activities such as “urban planning,” “regional planning” or the process of developing a city’s “master plan.” Community-based strategic planning was an adaptation of organizational development and “new” management theories that were popular during the late 1980s, including concepts as “SWOT” (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis and “KPAs” or key performance areas.

Often, communities that bring in facilitators and process design specialists have gotten stuck playing by the same old rules of community government. They need an outside perspective to help them identify and remove the barriers when they feel unable to move forward, either because of a lack of resources or a lack of trust and consensus on where they are going.

“We found that it is very helpful to use the process as a mirror,” says Scott Wingerson, an assistant city manager in Gladstone, Missouri, which won an award for strategic planning from the International City/County Management Association in 2007. “We began to see ourselves in a different way. We actually acknowledged that we had some problems and things that needed to be addressed.”<sup>30</sup>

## Gladstone on the Move

A small suburban community on the northern edge of Kansas City, Gladstone was experiencing a familiar challenge, the tension between a demand for better services and a reluctance to pay higher taxes. As a result, there was only one ambulance and two paramedics to provide emergency services, and no place to house the city’s recreational programs for youth. Unable to move forward, the city council voted in 2003 to bring in National Civic League Vice President Derek Okubo to help them through a strategic planning process which came to be known as Gladstone on the Move.

The first step was to appoint an initiating committee of about 10 or 15 people to conduct a process of “stakeholder” analysis to identify 60 to 80 people who needed to be at the table. Next, the stakeholder group met to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the community’s “civic infrastructure.” Then the committee drafted a vision statement describing what they wanted their community to look like in twenty years and identified several key performance areas. Gladstone’s inability to pay for improved services, the committee concluded, derived from two realities: first, the city’s inability to grow physically and, second, a seeming unwillingness of citizens to pay higher taxes.

The next step was to appoint an implementation committee to take the vision statement and KPAs and turn the planning process into a reality. “They were appointed from amongst themselves with zero input from elected officials and staff,” notes Wingerson. “Their mission was to bird-dog the implementation of the plan to ensure it didn’t gather dust on a shelf in somebody’s office. That’s what they did.”

In effect, the implementation committee became the campaign committee for the city’s first tax increase in 50 years, a move that would have seemed like political suicide if the city council had proposed it before the strategic planning process. With buy-in from the community, however, the tax proposal passed with 65 percent of the vote.

The success or failure of any given strategic planning effort depends on getting the active assent of stakeholders within the community. Of course, buy-in doesn't always follow. A poorly designed or implemented process can lead to greater levels of cynicism or frustration.

### ***A Different Vision for Dubuque***

*Like many other manufacturing towns in the industrial Midwest, Dubuque, Iowa in the mid-1980s was suffering the combined shocks of a short-term recession and a long term transition from a smokestack economy to the brave new world of information technologies and financial services. Things were so bad, someone actually put up a billboard on the highway leaving town. "Would the last person to leave Dubuque," it said, "please turn out the lights?"*

*Things looked very different twenty years later. With a restored waterfront, a thriving commercial center and a growing economy, Dubuque's civic leaders were beginning to think big about the future. "Few Iowa cities were hit harder in the 80s," noted a Des Moines Register editorial writer, "and few have a better outlook now. The Dubuque story might offer lessons for every Iowa city."*

*What made Dubuque different? It certainly doesn't hurt to have a scenic setting with chalky bluffs looming over the Mississippi River, or to have an unusually large number of historic buildings, being the state's oldest city. But Dubuque was also notable for its embrace of visioning and strategic planning as a strategy for harnessing the public knowledge and fostering a common sense of purpose and optimism.*

*It began in the 1990s with Vision 2000, a process that involved thousands of residents in developing a visioning statement for the future. A downtown master plan was developed during a four-year process that included community meetings, a citizen questionnaire, reactor group sessions and a validation survey to top it off. In 2005, a local community foundation and the chamber of commerce launched a tri-state regional visioning process known as Envision 2010.*

*Citizens were angry, disillusioned, and who could blame them? Government had failed them at every level and every stage of the crisis, from evacuation to resettlement.*

### **After the Flood**

A more difficult environment in which to organize a series of public meetings could scarcely be imagined than New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. A year and several months after the disaster, more than 70 percent of the city's housing had been wiped out. Less than half the population had returned, the remainder forming a vast "diaspora" of survivors spread out across a half a dozen states. Citizens were angry, disillusioned, and who could blame them? Government had failed them at every level and every stage of the crisis, from evacuation to resettlement.

Millions of dollars in recovery funds held by the state were frozen until the citizens of New Orleans could agree on a unified recovery plan. To further complicate matters, the latest round of "community congresses" was only one of several different planning processes, one backed by the mayor, another by the city council but none an obvious success story.

A group of funders that included the Rockefeller Foundation, the Greater New Orleans Foundation, the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Case Foundation and Surdna Foundation, was backing a new planning effort. Unfortunately, the first round of the new process, Community Congress I, had not gone well. Only 300 residents attended the event and, according to demographic polling, the participants were disproportionately wealthy, white and from the "dry" neighborhoods less devastated by the flood. So the funders brought in a group called *AmericaSpeaks* to help with outreach and event planning for Community Congress II.

Before Katrina, New Orleans had a majority African-American population, but Katrina had devastated the low lying neighborhoods with the least affluent residents. "So the unique challenge," in the words

of Carolyn Lukensmeyer, president of the nonprofit *AmericaSpeaks*, was “how do you contact a population that is still predominantly in diaspora?”<sup>31</sup>

Demographers and local officials tracked the largest numbers of missing citizens to Dallas, Houston, Atlanta and Baton Rouge, so a group of community organizers was deployed in those cities to find and engage them in a long distance planning process, the likes of which had never been seen. For outreach, the organizers tried everything from “robo-calls” recorded by Mayor Ray Nagin to a tailgate party for New Orleans Saints fans when the team, an important symbol of hope and recovery, played the Atlanta Falcons.<sup>32</sup>

The organizers combined face-to-face, small group meetings with large group decision-making, using a “21st Century Town Meeting” methodology that employs keypad polling, linked computers, large-screen projection and teleconferencing. The sessions networked New Orleans residents past and present across 21 different communities.

At a conference on civic innovation, one of the congress organizers later described the consensus that emerged from several months of these post modern “town hall meetings” as a “Kum Ba Yah moment that may or may not last,” but the immediate objective was met. The city council had publicly endorsed the Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP), paving the way for the release of \$117 million in federal funds held by the Louisiana Recovery Authority.



What made the second round of community congresses more successful than earlier efforts? Community leaders were impressed by the state-of-the-art technology, a research report later concluded, but what “helped to enhance UNOP’s credibility was the extensive outreach to ordinary people.” In fact, “many leaders were deeply moved by how the diversity in the room enabled meaningful discussions among diverse individuals.”<sup>33</sup>

*Simply publicizing an event or planning meetings isn't enough. Government officials and consultants have to make special efforts to ensure a representative sample of our increasingly diverse communities.*

## Equity and Representation

An ongoing challenge for practitioners, government officials and foundations is to prevent these new forms of democracy from falling into the familiar trap of what one former city planner and community organizer calls the “illusion of inclusion.”

Simply publicizing an event or planning meetings isn’t enough. Government officials and consultants have to make special efforts to ensure a representative sample of our increasingly diverse communities. This challenge can be particularly daunting with an intensive civic engagement process such as a charrette, which may take up an entire weekend, or an ongoing process that involves a major commitment of time.

“Time,” says Francisco Gonima, a consultant and former national coordinator of government liaison with the Red Cross, “is our only non renewable resource as individuals, so people are not going to give their time if they don’t feel it is going to have an impact. A lot of people are fairly cynical about government planning processes. There are perceptions that a lot of public input processes are just pro forma.”<sup>34</sup>

Engaging lower income and working class people means accommodating the schedules of hourly workers, who typically don’t have as much flexibility in their daily schedules as professionals or busi-



ness people. Providing childcare and food can make a meeting more inviting to working families, and holding meetings in decentralized locations such as recreation centers, libraries, schools, senior housing and community centers can help overcome the hassle and costs of transportation. Reemberto Rodriguez, a training coordinator with NeighborWorks, notes that the way many public meetings are publicized tends to reflect a homeowner bias. Special attention, he notes must be paid for outreach to apartment dwellers and renters.<sup>35</sup>

A bigger challenge than logistics is the historical imbalance of power and information between affluent Americans and low income workers or communities of color. Joe Brooks, vice president for civic engagement at PolicyLink, notes that many poor and working people may not understand how government works, much less how it could work for them. “It’s simple Civics 101,” he says. “I really don’t get the feeling people know how government works. If you don’t know how it works, you don’t know where to plug in.”<sup>36</sup>

### ***Developing leadership in Sturbridge, Massachusetts***

*The Town of Sturbridge, Massachusetts has a “citizen leadership academy” to educate citizens about how town government works and develop a talent pool for boards and committees.*

*Any resident of the town is invited to participate in the academy. Information about the academy is publicized on the town’s website and on the public access TV station. Students of the nine-week program have interaction with different town staff and current members of various boards and committees.*

*The academy also provides opportunities for citizens to exchange ideas, suggestions and concerns with town managers.*

*The academy features courses on legal issues, zoning public safety programs, ethics and conflict of interest rules, road maintenance, sewers, snow plowing, citizen input, libraries, recreation and senior services.*

## **Community Organizing and Collaborative Governance**

Michael Cortés, a consultant to foundations on diversity and equity issues, emphasizes the importance of good old-fashioned community organizing as a way of building the capacity of low income and disenfranchised groups. “Certainly if someone is organizing a discussion or process they should have extra outreach to congregations or a sports club or some other form of organization,” suggests Cortés. “The longer term answer involves an investment in community organizing, which I view as being complementary to collaborative problem-solving efforts.”<sup>37</sup>

Even with best intentions, public officials may not comprehend the complexity of equity issues. “There is a power imbalance that is always an obstacle,” says Cortés, “and the only way we’ve found to address that imbalance is community organizing in the tradition of the Civil Rights movement, the War on Poverty and the Industrial Areas Foundation.”

The challenges associated with recruiting working people and disenfranchised groups are even more daunting when it comes to recent immigrants. Knowledge/power imbalances and time constraints are compounded with the fear of being identified and targeted by immigration authorities. “You also, in some cases, are overcoming a cultural barrier,” says Gonima, “which is the idea of living in an environment where the government is asking your opinion. The fundamental proposition of government input is alien and strange. There is a tendency to look for a hidden agenda.”

In practical terms it may be helpful for a government agency or forum planner to partner with an existing community based organization to recruit certain hard to reach populations. “The multi-agency approach where you reach out to community-based organizations and nonprofits who are already trusted agents within particular communities can be highly effective,” says Gonima.

“The challenging news is that you have to be genuinely open to feedback from those community based organizations on design of the process and the ques-



tions you are asking,” he adds. “You can’t simply turn to them and say, ‘We have this design, and we want you to answer these questions.’ ”

*Words such as “deliberation” or “charrette” have specific meanings to specific groups and individuals, but those nuances are lost on most Americans, who—thanks to an uninterested media—may be unaware that such exotic activities even exist.*

## Possible Disconnects

If permanent government structures can become stale and less than representative (or falter because of political changes), temporary organizing efforts have their own distinctive set of challenges and potential drawbacks. To begin with, the different origins, disciplines and streams of activity have created a “Tower of Babel” effect. If one were to compile a glossary of civic engagement, the myriad of terms and phrases would probably be confusing to the average citizen. Words such as “deliberation” or “charrette” have specific meanings to specific groups and individuals, but those nuances are lost on most Americans, who—thanks to an uninterested media—may be unaware that such exotic activities even exist.

“We realized there were so many different streams of practice in this field, and they all use different terminologies,” says Sandy Heierbacher of the Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation. “We’ve been trying to create a common language, but I think we have been using language that really only appeals to people who care about the nuances in this work.”<sup>38</sup>

“At NCDD we try to keep track of what is going on out there, all of the resources that are available in the field, and we try to make it very easy to locate tools, guidebooks, things that can help them do these things better,” says Heierbacher, “but it is hard to find people doing these things at the local level, because they simply don’t use the terms, they don’t know what to search for if they are going to Google, and they may never find us and we don’t know how to get to them.”

As Terry Amsler, director of the Collaborative Governance Initiative, notes, many “homegrown” efforts in California are being organized by local officials, consultants and residents who may have little contact with widely known deliberative democracy advocates and experts in the field. Planning-related and other private firms often play a big and under-recognized role in local public engagement activities. A defining question for on-the-ground practice, he suggests, is whether “sponsors and practitioners have a considered and clear sense of the intended purposes of their planned public deliberation, and are the models or strategies selected likely to get them there.”<sup>39</sup>

Matt Leighninger, executive director of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, agrees. “There is this kind of disconnect,” he says. “There is a core group of people who consider themselves deliberation or democratic governance experts, whether they are academics or they work for some organization, and then there is this much larger shadow field doing the work. Some of them are connected to us and a lot of them aren’t. Often they just totally invent it.”<sup>40</sup>



This “disconnect” may be even more obvious at the local level than among state and federal officials, notes Sandy Heierbacher. “I think the more local you get, the more insulated people tend to be, the less aware they are of all the tools that are out there in this field and the less likely they are to use some of the terms that we use in this field like deliberation,” she says.

Others wonder whether there is a danger of communities getting too much of a good thing. Some

### *Neighborly Lawyers in Oakland, California*

*Oakland’s Neighborhood Law Corps has been described as a cross between the Peace Corps and a legal aid society. The city attorney’s office fields a team of energetic young lawyers who work with residents and neighborhood groups to rid the city of public nuisances, substandard housing and illegal activity. The goal, says Oakland City Attorney John Russo, is to combine a “sense of community activism” with the “sensibility of a legal aid attorney with municipal powers over health, safety and welfare.”*

*Talented young lawyers get paid in the low five figures (about half of what they could earn in their first year at a big firm) to work in the community for two years strictly enforcing code violations and, when necessary, negotiating with apartment and business owners to eliminate problems.*

*The lawyers work with community organizations, neighborhood residential associations, merchants groups and others in public meetings designed to develop work plans for the city’s neighborhoods.*

*Say Russo: “When you get a neighborhood that is organized around making change, and you piggyback their desires on the city’s health, safety and welfare powers, you have a much more powerful tool to compel.”*

*The program won an award for municipal excellence from the National League of Cities in 2006.*

<http://www.neighborhoodlawcorps.org/>

issues and circumstances lend themselves to deliberation and other forms of public engagement better than others. One facilitator and consultant spoke of reading the events section of the local newspaper to figure out how many public engagement efforts were happening in a major metro area. The answer, he said, was probably too many. Time is a precious commodity, and there are only so many citizen hours to go around.

“It’s great to have the model and great when you have the time and money and political will to use the model,” says city manager Rick Cole. “Meanwhile, life goes on, decisions get made. Do you just apply it to the big issues once every five years? Well, that has its limitations. Figuring when and how to apply civic engagement is a challenge.”

## Potholes and PDAs



In Worcester, Massachusetts, citizens roam the streets each weekend carrying hand-held computers with digital cameras looking for eyesores such as potholes, buckling sidewalks, derelict vehicles, dilapidated houses, weed strewn lots, illegal garbage dumps and downed stop signs, the kinds of public nuisances that make neighborhoods seem blighted and unsafe. The data is uploaded into a central clearinghouse so government managers can look at spreadsheets and analyze conditions to prioritize how they spend their precious dollars to keep neighborhoods looking healthy.

The system has become both a form of civic engagement and a means for understanding the challenges facing an aging, former rust belt manufacturing town. "Community leaders and city officials alike argue that it has changed how citizens and government view each other," writes Jonathan Walters of *Governing Magazine*, "as well as the big job of keeping a cash-strapped municipality and its downtown district and myriad neighborhoods healthy."<sup>41</sup>

It has also helped citizens understand exactly who is responsible for what, according to Roberta Schaeffer of the Wooster Regional Research Bureau.

About one quarter of the problems turned up by ComNET were not city government's responsibility. "In the course of starting a ComNET project," writes Schaeffer, "residents learn the nomenclature of government so that they can communicate successfully with one another."<sup>42</sup>

In their 1993 book, *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector*, David Osborne and Ted Gaebler wrote how government agencies trapped between the competing pressures of declining revenues and more demand for services were learning to be "mission-driven," "customer driven" and "market oriented."

It didn't take long, however, for this idea of better customer relations to mesh with an emerging ethic of democratic governance and citizen empowerment. Barbara-Cohn Berman, a former deputy personnel director for the City of New York, is an expert on local government performance measurement and reporting. With support from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation she hired a consultant to do focus group studies with citizens in New York, and what they found was illuminating.<sup>43</sup>

On the issue of homelessness, for instance, most citizens judged the city's efforts by how many homeless people they saw sleeping on the sidewalks, but city officials judged their own performance by how well they were monitoring conditions in homeless shelters, which most ordinary citizens never saw.

Another surprise: local transportation officials had no idea how much citizens cared about the appearance of city streets, the number of potholes and cracks, for instance. But this was an important visual impression of how well their neighborhoods were doing. In the early years of the government reinvention movement, local officials learned to think of the people who lived in their communities as "customers." Now they began to think of them as citizens and partners.

One innovation to come out of these new insights is ComNET, a Sloan backed program that has been implemented in neighborhoods in New York City, New York; Seattle, Washington; Des Moines, Iowa; Durham, North Carolina; Yonkers, New York and Irving, Texas, among others.

*In cities across the country, neighborhood organizers and local officials have developed "community indicators," quantifiable measures of community well-being to help citizens and government track progress or deterioration over time.*

## Vital Signs

Another by-product of reinventing government was a movement to combine the efficiencies of computerized government performance and reporting methods with the inclusive, participatory spirit of community development. In cities across the country, neighborhood organizers and local officials have developed "community indicators," quantifiable measures of community well-being to help citizens and government track progress or deterioration over time. Baltimore, Maryland has developed a system known as the Vital Signs program. Among other things, the Baltimore system allows neighborhood groups and local officials to know the median number of days it takes to sell a house in a particular area of the city,

how much the teen birthrate has fallen or ditto with the violent crime rate.

The program shares data with the city's CitiStats, an initiative started by former mayor Martin O'Malley to measure the performance of city agencies. The idea of CitiStats was to use the computerized reporting system developed to track crime problems in New York and other cities (CompStat) to monitor other measure of government performance. Other cities have developed their own community indicators, including Jacksonville, Florida, and Charlotte, North Carolina.

It is citizens themselves who typically select the community indicators to be monitored, usually during some sort of facilitated stakeholder process. The indicators are measured and reported regularly. In Baltimore, for instance, Vital Signs are released each year so city staff and citizens can see whether their community revitalization efforts are working at the neighborhood level. The Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance works with members of the community to ensure that the forty key indicators measured each year will be useful to groups that are organizing to bring about positive community change.

Nationally, the indicators movement has formed a Community Indicators Consortium (CIC) to advance the use and improvement of community indicators across the country. CIC has been building an inventory of indicator systems so community leaders and activists can learn about how to use them. The consortium is also developing a network of trainers to help these communities create and implement their own indicator systems.

## The Internet and Social Networking

It would be an understatement to say that the Internet is changing the way Americans gather information and discuss issues. "The Web provides a powerful platform that enables the creation of communities; distribution is frictionless, swift, and cheap," wrote Eric Alterman in the New Yorker magazine. "The old democratic model was a nation of New England towns filled with well-meaning, well-informed yeoman farmers. Thanks to the Web, we can all join



in a Deweyan debate on Presidents, policies, and proposals. All that's necessary is a decent Internet connection." <sup>44</sup>

Many communities have invested in well-designed web sites that offer information about government agencies, upcoming meetings and ways to become

more involved in their communities. Ventura's Civic Engagement Division, for instance, has a city manager blog, streaming videos of past public meetings, an online community magazine, and a "portal" for citizens to get information about local volunteer opportunities.

The benefits of integrating these different forms of media, digital, video and print, are already evident. Community cable access channels have been broadcasting city council meetings for years, but now, in many cities, citizens use their laptops to search for a meeting that may have happened months before and access these past proceedings at will. The next step, says Ventura's civic engagement manager, will be to compile a database so the city can better understand how citizens are engaging, what their interests are and what they would like to see from city government.

Yet technology and new media may be arenas in which local government's natural advantages—proximity, the power to convene and sense of place—don't always encourage innovation. "The rise of new communications tools and technologies has offered increasing opportunities for citizens to engage in civic discussions," notes consultant Wendy Foxmyn. "Unfortunately, many cities and towns have been slow, or completely stalled, in response to these opportunities."

Author Allison Fine, however, notes that using the Internet or social networking in new ways does not necessarily mean huge outlays of money. "People think it's going to be hundreds of thousands of dollars of software and hardware," she says. "All these tools are out there. Blogs are available. You can create your own network. You can do almost anything you want for almost no money right away. It's not a technical problem. It's a cultural problem." <sup>45</sup>

"There are people in the community who know how to do this. They don't have to be on staff. They don't have to be paid to do it. Why aren't we recruiting volunteers to help with these efforts? We have an over-professionalization of government and nonprofits where everything has to be staffed. There is an enormous capacity in communities if we just ask people for help."

### *New Planning Tools for Rural Communities*

*The Orton Family Foundation helps rural communities use cutting edge techniques for comprehensive land use planning. Orton CEO William Roper estimates that about 80 percent of their work is done in partnership with local government.*

*One of those tools is CommunityViz, which uses sophisticated geographical information software to help communities look at alternative scenarios and analyze their effects with interactive three-dimensional models of places as they are at the time and could be in the future. Orton also has its own proprietary software for key pad polling.*

*Key pad polling has added new dimensions to large public meetings. The technology consists of handheld remote devices linked by radio frequencies to a laptop computer and a Power Point projector. Software crunches the numbers on multiple choice questions. So instead of a show of hands, participants can punch in their opinions and see them projected on a screen in real time.*

*"It draws people to meetings because it is new and fun," says Karen Yacos, a former senior project manager for the Orton Family Foundation. "You get to see your ideas and how they stack up against other people's ideas. It's anonymous, so people feel free to answer the questions honestly."*

*Another advantage is the accuracy of recording. At a subsequent meetings, those Power Point "slides" can be accessed, allowing facilitators to get accurate readings on what people were thinking about a given question or scenario.*

Some communities, says ICMA's Robert O'Neill, are trying to develop "push" strategies to engage and inform citizens. "Theoretically, you can have access to e-mails and deliver a summary of an important set of issues that was debated yesterday to literally thousands of people the next morning," he says. "It would be a much more proactive set of strategies than just letting people know they can get information off your website."

O'Neill speculates about a time when local governments begin to tap into the expanding world of social networking, using web sites such as Facebook or craigslist to reach an even larger universe for community building and civic engagement. "The whole social networking piece is a rapidly emerging component," he says. "The use of these tools may actually get to a broader dimension of people."



*In some ways, however, the logic of the Internet and social networking may move away from the model of government as convener to a new role for government as partner and participant.*

## E-Democracy

The group E-Democracy.Org has created local on-line forums in ten communities in Minnesota and a few other states, drawing citizens and public officials into electronic conversations, but, in most instances, the entity hosting the on-line government is a committee that is independent of city hall. "Most elected officials in the communities are subscribed," says E-Democracy.org founder Steven Clift. "Most of them monitor it. A percentage of them participate. Minneapolis has 13 city council members, and I would say that there are about 4 or 5 who participate in a given year. The mayor of Minneapolis announced his candidacy on the forum before he did it at a press conference."

Clift likens these on-line forums to the use of local cable access channels 20 years ago. "If a community does not have an online space for active citizen engagement, then they are missing out," he says. "They aren't going to be able to respond well to citizens in the future. The citizens are going to be further disconnected. Whether they do it themselves with a nonprofit entity like E-Democracy.org or interact somehow with the local media to make sure their community has something like this, they should be doing something."

In some ways, however, the logic of the Internet and social networking may move us away from the model of government as convener to a new role for government as partner and participant. "Generally, organizations don't create interactive spaces that challenge them with their own money," notes Clift. "They won't do it. The key thing is to have a buffer between the forum and the council. You want to make sure there is something that allows the city to say, 'we aren't responsible for it, because we can't close it down.'" <sup>46</sup>

## Looking Ahead



How technology changes local government's role in civic engagement is one of several unknown factors to consider in looking to the future. "Place based" organizing may become less important than the Internet. Demographics have already altered the civic landscape in many communities. Immigration has become a bigger factor, not just in coastal areas and large urban centers, but in the exurbs and semi-rural interior. Population mobility has drained many communities of civic activists and business leaders with deep community roots. Membership organizations have been in decline for years as the "long civic generation" of joiners who experienced World War II passes the torch to "baby boomers," "Gen Xrs," and "Millennials."

It's worth noting, perhaps, that many of the most ambitious experiments in local democracy, New Orleans excluded, occurred during the 1990s, when a pent up demand for community building, citizen participation and government reinvention coincided with a period of uninterrupted economic growth. Was civic engagement responsible for results of these successful experiments or a boom-

driven revaluation of neglected neighborhoods and commercial districts?

When Carmen Sirianni and Lewis Friedland published their book *Civic Innovation in America* in 2001, a "civic renewal movement" in the United States drawing on "themes and models of innovation in community organizing and development, civic environmentalism...and other forms of collaborative engagement" seemed to be in the offing. Since 2001, however, some of the components of that movement have faded while others have continued to thrive. Civic engagement may not be part of a national conversation, but new networks of advocates and organizers have emerged.

Perhaps the values of civic engagement and democratic governance will filter outward from their bastions in various communities, nonprofits, foundations and schools of public administration. In the meantime, the interviews and readings that went into this report suggest some key issues for program officers and foundation executives to consider.



## Key Issues

### *How do we know that civic engagement is working?*

“How do we measure the impact?” asks Joe Brooks of PolicyLink. “How do we begin to share that impact with a broader audience?” There is convincing evidence that neighborhood based structures have increased levels of participation, but what about these temporary processes? Brooks has participated in a working group within the W. K. Kellogg Foundation’s “Civic Engagement Learning Year” looking into questions of measurement and evaluation.

### *Can we use sharper, more compelling, more comprehensible language?*

Ironically, democratic governance suffers from its relative lack of visibility and public familiarity. People know it when they do it, but few Americans would be able to describe it. Foundations and nonprofits should consider the example of the Sloan Foundation and the Fund for the City of New York’s use of focus groups to gauge the differences between the way government staff viewed the issue of performance measurement and the way the public viewed it. There are important concepts that need to be understood in plain (non-touchy feely language). The Study Circles Resource Center, for example, recently changed its name to “Everyday Democracy.”

### *How can we change administrative law to be more “civic friendly?”*

State and federal statutes have often mandated some form of public feedback or hearing. Public administration law could be more specific about what kind of “public involvement” needs to occur, thus ensuring a more inclusive, representative and meaningful conversation. “Sunshine” and open meetings laws have stifled innovation in some communities. When is there a quorum? When does a meeting need to be posted? “The problem is, you’ve got in-house lawyers who are incredibly risk averse,” notes Lisa Bingham, a professor at the University of Indiana.

### *What is the difference between community organizing and civic engagement?*

Public officials may not succeed in their efforts to have an inclusive process if they don’t consider the capacity building needs of low income or historically disfranchised communities. Community organizing groups play important roles in building capacity, but traditionally, they have been autonomous or even adversarial toward government. A possible research project: finding the right balance between confrontation and cooperation.

### *Should we target public sector groups?*

Terry Amsler emphasizes the importance of targeting public sector organizations such as the National League of Cities or the International City/County Management Association. Public officials, he says, are much more likely to get information from peers and associations than nonprofit advocacy organizations. The Rockefeller Brothers Fund recently awarded a three-year, \$300,000 grant to the National League of Cities to staff up its Democratic Governance Panel, which has been instrumental in providing information and networks for elected officials who want to find out more about deliberative democracy and other forms of civic engagement.


### *How can we help government officials become better consumers?*

A specific need, some experts note, is helping public officials become “better consumers,” given the number and variety of groups and companies offering technical services for strategic planning and other public processes. Some public officials are making their decisions with little information or comparative knowledge on the basis of what consultants are offering.

### *How best to harness the power of the Internet and new media?*

Consultant and author Allison Fine talks about the need to train tech-savvy younger citizens in the art of facilitation. She also advises local government agencies with meager resources to “Start small, but





do something. Don't build it yourself. It's up there already. Don't build a new forum. Don't build a new social networking site, the tools are already out there."

### *How to adapt to generational change?*

The looming retirement of the "Baby Boom" generation is beginning to have a huge impact on the field of public administration. There is about to be a huge turnover in the leadership of many communities, which provides both a challenge and an opportunity. Many of the civic innovators are about to retire. Will the succeeding cohorts have the same commitment to civic engagement? It will be important for schools of public administration to emphasize democratic governance to a new generation.

On the other hand, "gen nexters" and "millennials" will have a much more sophisticated understanding of the uses of technology and social media. And, as Allison Fine and others have suggested, younger citizens can play an important role in training their elders in the new uses of technology.

### *How do we share success stories?*

There are a variety of groups and projects that have their own collections of case studies or community stories, but often these lists are either incomplete or not specific to local government. Some web sites that tout cutting edge innovations are larded with examples from 10 to 15 years ago, which may suggest that the most dramatic examples date back to that time period, but it seems evident that some of these projects received start-up money but haven't been able to maintain their databases and web sites to keep them up to date.

## Conclusion

The past 15 years have been a time of remarkable innovation and experimentation in local government. Neighborhood councils, community development/strategic planning and new forums for dialogue and deliberation have dramatically changed the relationship between governors and the governed.

The social scientific data on structural changes in local government clearly show improvement in both the quality and quantity of civic engagement. Evidence of the success of temporary organizing efforts is more anecdotal. Some communities have begun to make civic engagement itself a top priority. Others are developing indicators and performance measures or forming ad hoc committees to determine whether their public outreach and engagement strategies are working.

The value system of public administration is changing. More public officials are looking for new ways to involve citizens in challenging decisions about budgets, land use planning and problem solving. Many citizens have become more active, demanding, sophisticated and knowledgeable about democratic processes at the local level, but there is much room for improvement in most communities.

Foundations and nonprofits have played an important role in encouraging innovation, providing support for new tools and ideas about how to have better community conversations based on respect, mutual listening, learning and consensus building, helping communities avoid endless debates and power struggles between competing interest groups.

First and foremost is the need to design and manage public conversations in ways that bring all voices to the table. Another challenge is the ongoing struggle to adequately fund city services and public infrastructure in a political and economic environment of austerity. With the power to discuss and decide, resources must follow or implementation will not occur. "Resources and budgets and money to fix things at the local level are getting very thin," notes Joe Brooks of PolicyLink. Many citizens, he says, may be asking themselves "why bother?" if "there is no money to change anything anyway."

We also have an ongoing challenge with the lack of coherence and public visibility of the movement to energize local democracy. Citizens know when they have been part of a meaningful public decision-making process, but they may not know that they are part of a larger trend or "movement."

Given these circumstances, it will be even more important for advocates, funders and nonprofits to push for innovation and provide the data and tools necessary to take this grand experiment to the next level, or to put it somewhat differently, to move beyond the "laboratory" phase of civic engagement into a new stage of implementation and institutionalization.

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