Strengthening

Democratic Governance

Changing the Way We Govern:

Building Democratic Governance in Your Community

NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES

NLC's CityFutures Program

The CityFutures Program consists of a program of engagement, analysis, outreach, and impact around the trends and changes affecting America's cities now and in the future. The program seeks to connect public and policy discussions to the reality of what is happening in America's cities. The program was undertaken with the belief that significant economic, demographic, and other changes are transforming the contexts in which municipal governments function. It is important to look beyond immediate issues in order to understand these recent, current, and future transitions and to use this knowledge to improve what governments do and how they do it.

The Program has three objectives:

1) To help municipal officials recognize, understand, and meet the emerging trends and challenges their communities face;
2) To foster and shape public discussion and policy debate aimed at developing the arrangements needed to meet these challenges; and
3) To help shape NLC activities and programs to reflect members' concerns, interests, and objectives, in an effort to produce real outcomes.

In essence, the program seeks to strengthen government by providing new perspectives on public issues and by challenging current assumptions.

The program is carried out primarily through NLC Advisory Council and four CityFutures Panels of local officials from cities and towns of varying size, location, and demographic composition. Panel activities revolve around investigating the issues and options that confront cities in specific policy and topical arenas, with a particular focus on trends, factors, and strategies. Currently, the CityFutures Panels include:

CityFutures Panel on Community and Regional Development
CityFutures Panel on Democratic Governance
CityFutures Panel on Equity and Opportunity
CityFutures Panel on Public Finance

For more information about the Program, contact NLC's Center for Research and Municipal Programs at (202) 626-3030.

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CHANGING THE WAY WE GOVERN:

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November 2006

NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES

Letter from NLC's Leadership

Local officials are finding new ways to work with citizens. In communities across the country, they are mobilizing people to make decisions, overcome conflicts, and solve critical public problems. They are pioneering a concept called **democratic governance:** the art of governing communities in participatory, deliberative, and collaborative ways.

Have you ever asked yourself one of these questions?

- When your constituents are angry about a particular issue, does it seem impossible to make everyone happy?
- When people fail to turn out for public meetings, do you wonder why? (Are they satisfied? Or disgusted? Or apathetic?)
- Do people have unrealistic expectations about what local government can do, given limited resources?
- Is it hard to get different kinds of people, different organizations, and different sectors to work together?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, you are not alone. In many ways, being a local official is more difficult than ever before: citizens are increasingly capable, skeptical, and impatient, while officials are becoming tired of confrontation and desperate for resources.

To help local leaders address these challenges, we are pleased to present *Changing the Way We Govern: Building Democratic Governance in Your Community,* developed through the work of NLC's CityFutures Panel on Democratic Governance. Drawing on case studies of successful projects, the guide:

- Explains how to educate, involve, and mobilize citizens in a variety of events and initiatives;
- Describes how communities have used democratic governance approaches to address key issues;
- Builds on city strategies for accomplishing key tasks using shorter-term mechanisms; and
- Describes some of the more permanent, structural forms of democratic governance that have emerged recently.

Changing the Way We Govern is an essential tool for anyone who is tired of the conflict and apathy created by old-fashioned citizen involvement methods – and who wants to tap into the full potential of citizens and public life.

Donald J. Borut
Executive Director

William R. Barnes
Director, Center for Research
And Municipal Programs

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We particularly thank the members of NLC's CityFutures Panel on Democractic Governance. The purpose of the Panel is to support NLC members seeking to improve local democracy by more effectively engaging with citizens in responding to their cities' challenges. The Panel seeks to help city officials reengage the broader public, not just as taxpayers and consumers of services, but as full partners in addressing the needs of the community. Panel members have identified and discussed themes and questions that help to shape the development of democratic governance. Panel members are listed below.

Portions of this guide were adapted or excerpted, with permission, from previous publications of the International City/County Management Association, League of Women Voters of the USA, NeighborWorks America, and Study Circles Resource Center, and we thank these organizations for their cooperation.

Portions were also excerpted from Matt Leighninger's book, *The Next Form of Democracy: How Expert Rule is Giving Way to Shared Governance – And Why Politics Will Never Be the Same* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006).

We hope you will find the guidance, narratives and case studies in the publication useful as you apply it to your city's challenges and opportunities.

CityFutures Panel on Democratic Governance, 2004-2006

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CHANGING THE WAY WE GOVERN

Across the country, cities are in the midst of a fundamental shift in the way that citizens and government work together. Frustrated with the flaws in community politics, many local leaders have put a new emphasis on mobilizing citizens in order to make decisions, overcome conflicts, and solve critical public problems. This new approach is sometimes called "democratic governance."

Democratic governance is the art of governing a community in participatory, deliberative, inclusive and collaborative ways.

Democratic governance efforts are attractive to citizens because they help them to:
- Learn more about local issues and the decision-making process
- Establish partnerships for solving neighborhood and community problems
- Provide input on policy decisions
- Gain the skills and connections they need to become community leaders
- Meet with people who have different views and backgrounds from their own
- Feel like they are part of a community.

At the same time, democratic governance efforts can help local officials to:
- Find out what citizens really think about issues and policy decisions
- Mobilize citizens to take action on neighborhood and community problems
- Defuse tensions between different groups of people
- Talk with citizens in a less confrontational atmosphere
- Show citizens that certain public decisions are difficult and complex
- Help citizens understand the financial picture for local government
- Reach out to people who have felt or been excluded in the past
- Create a stronger sense of belonging and community.

Many cities and towns have organized temporary, *ad hoc* democratic governance projects, mobilizing citizens to address a single issue, plan, or policy decision. Other communities have instituted on-going city-wide neighborhood council systems in order to gather citizen input and strengthen the delivery of public services.

In the last ten years, hundreds of communities have launched temporary organizing efforts, and dozens of cities have instituted neighborhood council systems. "Both the temporary projects and the ongoing structures are valuable. To get an accurate picture of democratic governance, you have to look at both," says Kevin Frazell of the League of Minnesota Cities, who serves on NLC's Democratic Governance Panel.

Whether they are short-term efforts or long-term structures, successful democratic governance efforts employ four key principles:

1. Recruiting people by reaching out through the various groups and organizations to which they belong, in order to assemble a large and diverse "critical mass" of citizens.
2. Involving those citizens in a combination of small- and large-group meetings: structured, facilitated small groups for informed, deliberative dialogue; and large forums for amplifying shared conclusions and moving from talk to action.
3. Giving the participants in these meetings the opportunity to compare values and experiences, and to consider a range of views and policy options.
4. Effecting change in a number of ways: by applying citizen 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.

New assumptions about politics

Communities are using these principles for very immediate, practical reasons. Many cities are encountering budget shortfalls, as officials find it more and more difficult to convince citizens to support critical public services. In other places, controversies over race and cultural difference threaten to ignite violence. In some communities, decisions over land use and the siting of public facilities are increasingly mired in lawsuits and "not in my backyard" arguments. And in still other places, scandals involving the police, and other conflicts between residents and public employees, have become more common and more destructive.

In many cases, democratic governance efforts have helped local officials navigate these kinds of crises. But these projects also cause officials to rethink their basic assumptions about politics. "When you get down to it, what we're really talking about here is whether the current form of representative government is obsolete," says Steve Burkholder, mayor of Lakewood, Colorado, and former chair of the Democratic Governance Panel. "We seem to be moving toward a different kind of system, in which working directly with citizens may be just as important as representing their interests." When Burkholder convened a group of Lakewood residents to talk about ways to improve the local political process, one of their main conclusions was that the city government and the residents were stuck in a 'parent-child relationship,' when what they needed was an 'adult-adult' relationship."

This change in mindset can be just as significant for public employees as it is for public officials. "The employees usually look to the elected officials for direction – it can be a big shift for them to think that the citizens themselves are also a main constituency," says Frazell. This may be particularly true for mid-level public employees, who are often more insulated from citizens than elected officials, top administrators, or rank-and-file employees like police officers or teachers.

Sharing the burden

In this transition, one idea that seems to be emerging is that local governments cannot be expected to promote and ensure democratic governance all by themselves. "In some cities, elected officials have been the catalysts for this shift, but they are never the sole change agents," says Bev Perry, past mayor of Brea, California. It takes a broad range of leaders and organizations to help organize democratic governance efforts. The term "governance" itself – as opposed to "government" – affirms that every person and group has responsibilities to fulfill and roles to play. We all have duties and privileges as citizens, some of us have specific functions as public officials and public employees, and we all have roles as public-minded members of the various groups and organizations to which we belong.

Trust is a key word in this transition. Initiating a democratic governance effort requires a basic level of goodwill: citizens have to trust that officials will be using their input and that the effort will make a real impact; public officials and employees have to trust that citizens are willing and able to participate in reasonable, productive ways. When a community takes this leap of faith together, they begin a process which can, over time, rebuild trust between citizens and government.

On the other hand, a poorly organized project can further damage the trust between citizens and government. Here are some danger signs to watch out for:

- There is not enough staffing to coordinate the recruitment of large numbers of people
- The effort is being described in a way that seems narrow, technical, and unappealing
- There is not a strong plan for how to help participants take action on the ideas they generate
- There is an expectation that local government will single handedly implement any action ideas that emerge
- The information being provided to citizens is biased or incomplete
- There is no process to evaluate and collect feedback on the project

Understanding democratic governance

In an increasingly busy and sophisticated world, where citizens have more to contribute but less time to spend, many local officials are rethinking how they interact with the public. The best examples of democratic governance go far beyond the standard legal requirements for citizen participation. They also do more than simply asking citizens for their recommendations; officials who are experienced in this work will say that if you ask residents only for their input, you may just end up with a larger to-do list.

The best projects and structures help citizens learn more about the issues, connect their personal experiences to the policy debate, forge effective working relationships with public employees, develop detailed plans and policy recommendations, and

devote their own time and energy to implementing those action ideas. They demonstrate new possibilities for overcoming community divisions, making difficult policy decisions, and generating citizen action.

The landscape of local politics is changing, and officials need to understand the shift in order to maximize the potential benefits and address the potential challenges of democratic governance. The remainder of this guide provides in-depth explanations on how to put together both short-term and long-term structures for involving your citizens in community life. It also offers stories about the successes and failures of the civic experiments being implemented around the country. These stories are probably the best teachers: as you move forward with your own democratic governance efforts, be sure to look for relevant examples from other communities, and contact local leaders who have done this kind of work.

CHANGING ROLES FOR LOCAL OFFICIALS, PUBLIC EMPLOYEES, AND CITIZENS

In large part, the recent evolution in local politics is being driven by the fact that citizens, local officials, and public employees have different expectations, concerns, and capabilities than they did twenty or thirty years ago. Many local leaders are acknowledging these changes and beginning to adjust public roles accordingly.

When they reach out to citizens, officials are motivated partly by the need to feel respect and validation from their constituents. They soon learn that their constituents have the same need.

As citizens, officials, and public employees try to work together more closely, they often find that they have to deal with the baggage of past frustrations before they can do anything else. Redefining public roles means more than just handing out new job descriptions: it means that people have to address what has happened in the past, how they feel about each other now, and what their expectations and responsibilities will be for the future.

The 'internal shift' in the mindset of local officials

Many public officials are unsure what citizens are actually thinking. They are tempted to assume that if people don't turn out at city council sessions and other public meetings, they must be satisfied with the performance of government and the state of the community. But at some point, most public officials eventually find themselves in a situation where large numbers of citizens do turn out – and they are yelling as loud as they can.

Questions for reflection

1. Why did you get involved in local government? What inspired you to become a local official (or to work with local officials)?
2. Why is it important to involve people in addressing key issues in the community? Describe a particular issue or policy decision: Why was it important to get citizens involved?
3. What challenges do you face in trying to get people involved?
4. How do you involve people?
   - What kinds of meetings or activities do you ask them to take part in?
   - How do you recruit people?
   - What expectations do you have for the people who participate: Do you want them to become informed? Give input? Take action? Come to consensus? Change their behavior?
5. What are the most successful principles or strategies you've used in your citizen involvement work?

In these meetings, some officials get defensive, while others keep their cool. Some say that these policy fiascos have caused them to rethink the reasons they ran for public office. "Citizens don't always realize that elected officials are human beings too," says Henrietta Davis, a city councilwoman from Cambridge, Massachusetts who is a member of NLC's Democratic Governance Panel. "When the public is

screaming at you, it does make you question why you chose a career in public service."

These kinds of experiences have motivated many public officials to initiate democratic governance efforts. Within the context of those projects, they are able to establish a more reasonable, productive relationship with their constituents. They also seem to be demonstrating three new leadership qualities:

1. *Building coalitions of organizations which can reach out to citizens.* The true value of coalition-building may be that it allows you to recruit and involve large numbers of people. "For years, the literature on collaborative governance didn't even mention citizens," says William Potapchuk, who has written extensively on the topic. Officials treated the leaders of businesses, nonprofits, churches, and other groups as 'stakeholders' who could represent their constituencies at the decision-making table. Now, officials are realizing that these organizations are more than just interest groups: they are conduits for reaching the citizens themselves.

2. *Presenting information in a way that helps citizens understand the policy options.* Rather than advocating for their own preferred solutions to public problems, many officials are realizing that residents need a basic level of information before they can understand or support a given policy. In democratic governance efforts, local leaders are providing basic background information in plain, jargon-free language, and describing all the main policy options on the table – including ones that the officials themselves do not agree with. Their approach acknowledges that all "facts" must be interpreted, that there are many valid viewpoints, and that common ground can only be reached through deliberation.

What is a citizen?

The term "citizen" has a rich history in American democracy. However, it can also be a confusing word to use. Sometimes it is defined in a narrow, legal way, meaning only those people who hold U.S. passports or are eligible to vote. In this guide, we will use a broader definition: citizens are simply the people who live in that community.

3. *Calling on citizens, community organizations, and other groups to do their part.* In order to avoid unrealistic expectations and tap the full problem-solving potential of their communities, local officials are making it clear that government can't do the job alone. They are asking citizens to contribute their own time, energy, and resources to implementing policies and attacking the fundamental public problems that the policies are trying to address. In this way, they are expanding the notion of policy – from an uppercase "P" to a lowercase "p" – beyond its purely legal, legislative meaning, so that it reflects the thinking and resources of the whole community.

New expectations and responsibilities for citizens

At the beginning of the 21st Century, citizens seem to be both more educated and more cynical than ever before; they may have less time for public life, but they also have a greater aptitude for participation. They may feel more entitled to the services and protection of government, and yet have less faith that government will be able to deliver on those promises. They may be less attentive to community affairs, and yet they seem better able to find the information, allies, and resources they need to affect an issue or decision they care about.

These generalizations gloss over class and cultural differences: the 'haves' are usually more connected than the 'have nots,' raising the question of how changes in democracy may reinforce social inequalities. But even in economically impoverished neighborhoods, people are demonstrating their impatience and their capacity. When people get together in small groups to share experiences, consider different views and options, and take action, they are quickly confronted with their differences. They need to deal with those differences, and value them, in order to succeed.

The most successful of these efforts meet the typical expectations of citizens, but they establish new responsibilities for citizens as well. Democratic governance efforts ask citizens to:

- Behave respectfully, even when discussing a controversial issue.
- Try to understand the views of people you disagree with.
- Try to understand why policy decisions are sometimes difficult for officials to make.
- Decide how they can help tackle the challenges being discussed (rather than making recommendations that only government can implement).
- Share what they've learned with other people, and try to get them involved.

Four dimensions of change

By taking these changing roles and attitudes into consideration, local officials come up with a more complete picture of how change can occur in a community. "Too often, cities ignore the internal dimensions of change," says organizational change consultant John Ott, who uses the box below to illustrate his point. "They don't always acknowledge that the way citizens and public employees are thinking may be just as important as the budgets and policies they're working with."

	Internal	External
Individual	• Thoughts • Attitudes • Feelings • Sense of purpose • Sense of individual identity [What people think about a new policy]	• Behaviors • Skills and competencies • Public commitments [What people say about a new policy]
Group	• Purpose • Values and norms • Feelings – e.g., of safety and connection • Alignment of individual/group intentions • Sense of collective identity [Whether people agree on the purpose of a new policy]	• Budgets • Systems • Structures • Collaborative agreements [The new policy]

Democratic governance and social equality

There is still much to learn about how the advance of democratic governance affects social equality. When you are recruiting people to participate in governance, it is harder to attract those who are less educated, have lower incomes, or are newer to this country than it is to find the ones who are well-educated, well-entrenched, and well-off. It may be that traditional forms of protest become less effective, because the voices of the disempowered are co-opted or drowned out by newly empowered middle-class citizens.

But there are likely to be positive effects as well. First and foremost, attempts to involve citizens in governance can establish new arenas in which the disempowered can find allies and articulate their interests. As people connect policy issues to their own experiences, listen to the views of others, and find ways to work together, they become more aware of the cultural differences that have historically divided many of the 'haves' from many of the 'have-nots.' In the end, the effect of democratic governance on equality may depend on the extent to which local leaders insist on broad-based recruitment, acknowledge issues of race and cultural difference, and help grassroots groups become more dynamic and participatory.

Changing assumptions about government and politics

As local civic experiments continue to multiply, they seem to suggest changes in some of our traditional assumptions about government and politics. The chart below attempts to summarize these shifts:

	Traditional citizen involvement	Democratic governance
Who is responsible for solving public problems?	Governments	Whole community – governments, citizens, businesses, community organizations of all kinds
What are the criteria for "good government?"	Openness and efficiency	Ability to work with the public – identifying priorities, marshalling a variety of resources, achieving tangible changes, and reporting on your progress
How should governments recruit citizens?	Public officials call meetings, use media for outreach	Proactive, network-based recruitment by governments and other groups, reaching large numbers and different kinds of people
How should issues be discussed?	Public officials 'sell' the policy they support; citizens decide whether to buy	Basic background information provided, range of views laid on the table; chance to connect personal experience to policy debate
How should government treat citizen self-interest?	Citizen self-interest is static; we can't expect people to change their minds	Citizen interests are malleable, and can be changed through information, exposure to others with different views
What is the civic duty of the average citizen?	Stay informed, vote, and obey the law	Become more informed, take part in dialogue, make decisions, take action
When should citizens be involved in public life?	Whenever there is a crisis, a big decision to be made, or some other specific reason	All the time – when there is a range of reasons to participate, people stay involved
Who governs?	Public officials, in the name of the electorate	Public officials, public employees, community organizations, citizens – all with roles and responsibilities that are distinct but complementary

THE SHORT TERM: INVOLVING CITIZENS IN A PARTICULAR ISSUE OR DECISION

Most democratic governance efforts are temporary projects designed to involve citizens in addressing a key issue, providing input on a policy decision, or formulating a plan. These are typically community-wide programs, but not always: sometimes an individual neighborhood will organize a project like this, and there have even been examples of statewide efforts.

Many different kinds of organizations have taken the lead in these projects, including civic groups, mayors' offices, nonprofit organizations, school districts, faith-based groups, human relations commissions, police departments, community activists, and neighborhood associations. However, it is usually a mistake for any one group to try to organize something like this single handedly: to reach a wide range of citizens, the lead organization should enlist many other groups as allies.

Step 1 – Setting goals and expectations

It is important to consider what you hope the project will achieve, since that should affect how you design it. Here are some common goals of democratic governance efforts:

- Ensuring that citizens are informed and connected;
- Resolving conflicts and bridging divisions in the community;
- Involving citizens in an important policy decision, or in the development of a plan;
- Generating innovative solutions to community problems, and encouraging citizens and citizen groups (including churches, businesses, nonprofits, and neighborhood associations) to help implement them;
- Providing skills and connections for new leaders; and
- Involving people who haven't been active in the community before.

Local leaders sometimes emphasize one of these goals more than the others, and they will adjust how they structure the project accordingly. For situations where the public is relatively uneducated about the issue, organizers will include informational sessions early on in the process. When conflicts seem particularly acute, they will allow more time for participants to talk about the root causes of the divisions, and how the community can re-establish trust and respect. In cases where a particular policy decision is on the table, organizers will typically devote one session to considering the major views and options relevant to the decision.

Leaders trying to formulate community plans may sometimes divide the project into two phases: one in which they gather input on basic priorities from a large number of people, and a second stage where a smaller set of participants participate in fleshing out the details of the plan. When generating citizen action is the main priority, organizers will devote more of their staff time, media outreach, and fundraising work

to supporting the action teams that emerge from the discussions. If reaching people who haven't been politically active is a core goal, leaders will spend more time building a coalition that is capable of reaching into all sectors of the community

On the other hand, democratic governance is complicated by the fact that citizens have their own objectives for getting involved. Organizers may feel a natural inclination to be very focused and specific about the goals of their programs, but if they don't correctly anticipate why ordinary citizens want to take part, the recruitment efforts will suffer.

To develop a shared understanding of what your organizing group hopes to accomplish, and to identify some potential barriers to your work, consider using the following goal-setting exercise. Identify someone to facilitate the session, and assign a timekeeper who will let the group know when it is time to move on to the next step:

1. Ask everyone to take a few minutes to jot down their response(s) to the following question (please ask people to write their ideas on sticky notes writing one idea on each note. Please ask them to write clearly so everyone can see the ideas). The question is: ***What do you hope will be different for the community as a result of the project?*** **5 minutes**
2. Go around the group, asking everyone to share one idea at a time until all ideas are shared. As the group shares their ideas, collect the sticky notes and put them on the wall or easel. Put similar ideas together. **10 minutes**
3. Invite the group to comment on the ideas. Do any clear themes emerge? Should the notes be rearranged to reflect these themes? **5 minutes**
4. Next, ask everyone to take a few minutes to jot down their responses to the following question (using the same process as above): ***What are some of your concerns as we move forward? What barriers do you see?*** **5 minutes**
5. Go around the group, sharing one idea at a time until all ideas are shared. As the group shares their ideas, collect the sticky notes and put them on the wall or easel. Put similar ideas together. **10 minutes**
6. Revisit the "hopes" list. Convert the hope themes to goal statements. Ask the group to add any other goals that are not covered. **15 minutes**

Post the "concerns" list at every organizing meeting as a reminder. Occasionally, ask the group, "How are we doing regarding our concerns? What are we doing to address any barriers?"

Step 2 – Choosing meeting formats

Most successful democratic governance efforts combine meetings of different types and sizes. To help you decide what combination of meetings you want to organize, this section describes some of the main formats being used in democratic governance projects.

Large-group meetings

Large is a relative term: in a neighborhood, 30-50 people might be considered a large group, whereas a city-wide forum might include hundreds of participants. Large forums are useful because they can disseminate information, amplify citizen opinions, attract decision-makers and the media, connect people with resources, and inspire collective confidence. The following list separates these different functions, but many large-group meetings are a combination of several of them.

Informational forums

Description:
- Relies on speakers or an expert panel, followed by questions from the audience.
- Most direct way of disseminating information to the community.

Goals that can be achieved with this format:
- Ensuring that citizens are informed and connected.

Best when combined with:
- Small-group meetings to help citizens better understand the information they receive.

Role of handout materials:
- Generally, to inform participants.

Special requirements:
- Expert speakers or panelists who are engaging, informative, and plain-spoken.
- Ensuring a balance of multiple perspectives on the panel.

Eugene Decisions
Eugene, Oregon

Description: Several years ago, the Eugene City Council faced a budget shortfall. The city began working with the Deliberative Democracy Project at the University of Oregon to involve citizens in deciding how to balance the budget. The resulting project, Eugene Decisions, utilized a series of surveys and questionnaires, followed by a series of community workshops where participants used a booklet and worksheet to generate their own recommendations. The city then summarized the conclusions and used them to prepare a plan for the budget. Then a second round of surveys and workshops was held to gauge citizens' support for the plan.
Number of participants: 680 in the first round of workshops; a slightly lower number in the second.
Population of community: 138,000
Time spent by participants: 3 hours
Staffing/funding: City funded the effort; the city and the Deliberative Democracy Project staffed it.
How were meetings structured? Large forum with breakout sessions; small groups were facilitated by citizen volunteers and supported by city staff who answered questions; groups used a booklet and worksheet to structure their discussion, and made decisions by majority vote.
Sample outcomes: City council adopted the main recommendations made by the participants, which included efficiency measures, user-fee increases, service reductions, and service expansions.
Benefits: Gathered a great deal of input on city budget and allowed citizens and officials to work through what could have been a highly contentious situation.
Challenges: Did not seem to enlist citizens and community groups in contributing their own effort and resources to public problem-solving.

Organizational resources to consult (see Resource section for contact information):
- League of Women Voters
- Public Forum Institute

Decision-making forums

Description:
- Designed to foster communication among citizens, and sometimes between citizens and public officials, to influence a policy decision.
- Often designed to be deliberative: to help people carefully consider different sides of an issue, and to uncover the values underneath different options.
- Main policy options may have been spelled out beforehand, or they may be determined by the participants during the course of the meeting.
- Often include small-group breakout sessions; these dialogues often adhere to the democratic small-group meeting format described in the next section.
- May utilize technology, such as polling keypads, video projection, and laptops, to move between large- and small-group discussions and summarize conclusions quickly.

Goals that can be achieved with this format:
- Involving citizens in important policy decisions, or in the development of a plan;
- Sometimes combined with elements of an action forum to encourage and coordinate action efforts by citizens and citizen groups.

Best when combined with:
- Focus groups or democratic small-group meetings that can be used as breakout sessions.
- Smaller meetings can also be used as a lead-in to the forum.

Single event or sustained effort?

Whether they are large, small, or online, most meeting formats work best when they are part of a larger democratic governance project that includes different kinds of meetings. Depending on your goals, your project will probably be more successful if you give people a number of ways to participate over several weeks or months.

Role of handout materials:
- To provide background information.
- To lay out the main views or options being considered.
- May include questions to help stimulate thinking and discussion.

Special requirements:
- To spell out main policy options beforehand, producing a guide (or adapting a national version) may be useful.
- Need moderator with special training or professional expertise.
- For versions that rely on technology, need software, hardware, site licenses, and/or professional expertise.

Organizational resources to consult:
- AmericaSpeaks
- Center for Deliberative Democracy (Stanford University)
- National Issues Forums Institute
- Study Circles Resource Center

Visioning forums

Description:
- Similar to decision-making forums, but used for planning the "built environment": the buildings, parks, streets, and sidewalks of a neighborhood, city, or metro region.
- Sometimes use tools that help citizens visualize proposals: maps, three-dimensional models, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data, etc.

Goals that can be achieved with this format:
- Involving citizens in important planning decisions, or in the development of shared priorities;
- Sometimes combined with elements of an action forum (see description below) to encourage and coordinate action efforts by citizens and citizen groups.

Best when combined with:
- Focus groups or democratic small-group meetings that can be used as breakout sessions.
- Smaller meetings can also be used as a lead-in to the forum.

Role of handout materials:
- To provide background information.
- To lay out the main views or options being considered.
- May include questions to help stimulate thinking and discussion.

Decatur Roundtables
Decatur, Georgia

Description: Decatur is a small city, adjacent to Atlanta, which has experienced dramatic gentrification in the last ten years. After a number of conflicts over land use and other issues, the City partnered with a local nonprofit, Common Focus, to involve citizens in the development of a strategic plan. Early in the organizing effort, Common Focus assembled a community network map of all the organizations and groups in the city; this helped compel other groups to join in. Over 450 people were involved in multiple-session "Decatur Roundtables," addressing issues such as growth, race, and education. After the small-group sessions had ended, participants gathered at a city-wide forum to share their conclusions and further refine their ideas. Using input from the roundtables, the city drafted the basic parameters of the plan, and then enlisted 250 citizens to help flesh out the full plan.
Number of participants/year: 450
Population of community: 16,000
How intensive is participation? 8+ hours
Staffing/funding: City of Decatur and area businesses.
How were meetings structured? Roundtables were facilitated and followed a series of questions and viewpoints in a discussion guide.
How were participants recruited? Through the many organizations included in the network map.
Sample outcomes: Development of award-winning community plan; establishment of the Decatur Neighborhood Alliance; increased use of tax abatement plan for senior citizens.
Benefits: Detailed, broadly supported community plan, which many citizens and organizations have helped to implement.
Challenges: Inability to sustain involvement of citizens in neighborhood associations or other community meetings.

Special requirements:
- Expertise of architects or planners for illustrating options, responding to public input, and ensuring that plans are feasible.

Organizational resources to consult:
- AmericaSpeaks
- National Charrette Institute
- National Civic League
- NeighborWorks Training Institute

Action forums

Description:
- Often used after a series of small-group meetings to help citizens act on the ideas they generated in their discussions.
- Sometimes used to help citizens move directly into action planning (action groups will usually require further support and assistance in order to succeed).
- May have different elements: the opportunity for citizens to join committees or task forces to work on particular projects; the involvement of public officials or other decision-makers, who listen to citizen recommendations; booths set up by different organizations to recruit volunteers; or all of the above.

Goals that can be achieved with this format:
- Encouraging and coordinating action efforts by citizens and citizen groups (including churches, businesses, nonprofits, and neighborhood associations)

Best when combined with:
- Democratic small-group meetings as a lead-in.
- Some events that incorporate action forum elements into decision-making forums.

Role of handout materials:
- To provide background information.
- To describe opportunities (either existing organizations and programs or new committees/task forces) available.

Special requirements:
- Support of public officials and other decision-makers.
- Involvement of public employees (police officers, planners, educators, etc.) and other professionals who work on public issues.

Effective small-group facilitators:

- Are impartial; the facilitator's opinions are not part of the discussion.
- Help the group set some ground rules and keep to them.
- Help group members identify areas of agreement and disagreement.
- Use the discussion materials to bring in points of view that haven't been talked about.
- Create opportunities for everyone to participate.
- Focus and help to clarify the discussion.
- Summarize key points in the discussion, or ask others to do so.

Organizational resources to consult:
- NeighborWorks Training Institute
- Study Circles Resource Center

Small-group meetings

Small-group public dialogues usually number about ten people, and the discussions are usually facilitated. Beyond those similarities, the key differences between small-group formats include: the purpose of the group; the specific role of the facilitator; the kind of discussion materials handed out; and the total amount of time spent in the discussion.

As a vehicle for public dialogue, small-group formats work best when large numbers of people are participating – in other words, when many small groups are meeting at the same time. Organizers will often then use large-group events to summarize and build on the conclusions of the small groups.

Democratic small-group meetings

Description:
- Features an impartial facilitator, ground rules set by the group, and a guide that lays out open-ended questions and sample viewpoints to structure the dialogue.
- Discussion usually begins with participants sharing their experiences with the topic.
- Groups usually meet for several sessions, though not always; sometimes they take the form of breakout groups in the midst of large forums.

Goals that can be achieved with this format:
- Single-session groups can be used to inform citizens and affect policy decisions by gathering information from the participants. However, a single session usually won't lead to greater consensus around a policy decision, or more willingness by citizens to help implement the policy.
- With multiple sessions, groups can resolve conflicts, build consensus around policy decisions, encourage action efforts, and involve new people. However, a concluding large-group meeting is usually necessary to culminate the small-group sessions.

Role of facilitator:
- Facilitator remains impartial, helps the group set ground rules, uses the guide to structure the discussion and introduce a range of arguments for consideration.

Role of handout materials:
- In some cases, the guide is critical for structuring the sessions.
- Questions in the beginning elicit relevant stories and experiences from participants (which helps the process of developing relationships and strengthening ongoing action).

- Sample viewpoints or choices help the group consider larger, more abstract questions (What are the root causes of this problem? What are the policy options?).
- Brainstorming exercises at the end help participants plan how they might take action.

Best when combined with:
- Any of the large-group formats, depending on project goals. For affecting policy decisions, use informational forums at the beginning of the small-group sessions, and decision-making forums at the end. To encourage action efforts, use an action forum (see previous section).

Special requirements:
- Writing a locally specific guide is ideal but can be difficult; guides are also provided by national organizations.

Organizational resources to consult:
- National Issues Forums
- NeighborWorks America
- Public Conversations Project
- Study Circles Resource Center
- Viewpoint Learning

Focus groups

Description:
- Used primarily as a way of gathering information.
- Groups usually meet only once, for two hours or less.
- Used instead of surveys, or in combination with them, because they can provide much more nuanced, comprehensive information about public views.
- Sometimes used to "frame" the various views and options on an issue, in order to create a discussion guide to be used in one of the other formats.

Goals that can be achieved with this format:
- Affecting policy decisions, mainly by helping decision makers understand what citizens think about an issue or plan.

Role of facilitator:
- Expert interviewer who asks probing, thought-provoking questions without trying to bias the participants.

Role of handout materials:
- To stimulate discussion; facilitator explores participants' reactions (materials could include pictures or video clips as well as written materials.)

Best when combined with:

- A large-group forum to summarize the conclusions and explain to participants how the input will be used. Another forum could be held sometime later, after the decision was made, to explain how the input was influential (it is a mistake to expect that participants will get this information through the media or in some other way).
- An action forum to help participants work on their own action plans.

Special requirements:
- Trained focus group facilitators (usually paid professionals; occasionally graduate students).
- An interview guide or "protocol" for facilitators to use.

Organizational resources to consult (see Resource section for contact information):
- Public Agenda
- NeighborWorks Training Institute
- Harwood Institute

Structured conversations

Description:
- Many different kinds of dialogues fall under this category: some are quite simple and easy to organize, while others are highly structured and require a specific kind of facilitation.
- One common use of structured conversations is at the beginning of a public dialogue project, to engage a small number of people who will then work together to involve much larger numbers of citizens.
- Variations include conversation cafés, wisdom councils, wisdom circles, and world cafés.
- Sometimes used to "frame" the various views and options on an issue, in order to create a discussion guide to be used in one of the other formats.

Goals that can be achieved with this format:
- Providing in-depth information to smaller numbers of people rather than basic information to larger numbers so they are well informed.
- Resolving conflicts, though building in more action-related elements is critical for recruiting more than just a small set of participants.

Role of facilitator:
- Depends on type; some don't require a facilitator at all; others require a trained facilitator who will direct the conversation.

Role of handout materials:
- Depends on type; usually, to enrich and inform the discussion.

Best when combined with:

- Any of the large-group or on-line formats can be complemented through the addition of structured conversations, as a way of deepening the dialogue and helping people learn more from each other.

Special requirements:
- Depends on type.

Organizational resources to consult:
- Conversation Café
- Public Conversations Project
- National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation also lists a number of organizations promoting various kinds of structured conversations.

Step 3 – Predicting costs and staffing needs

Budgets for democratic governance efforts can vary dramatically. Some have been conducted entirely on an in-kind basis: that is, the organizing was accomplished by volunteers or by people who did the work as part of their existing jobs, and all of the other elements (food, supplies, meeting sites, etc.) were donated by various organizations.

Other projects had budgets that totaled hundreds of thousands of dollars. It all depends on the goals, available resources, and design of your program. But no matter what their budgets look like, the best projects rely on a substantial degree of work and commitment by local organizers, facilitators, and recruiters.

The single most critical cost to consider is the staff time of the coordinator. Because these projects involve many different groups and organizations, it is important to have one person – or depending on the size of your community, a team of people – who can serve as the 'hub' of the operation. The coordinator should be someone with "people skills": the ability to make initial phone calls, forge partnerships, make requests without appearing greedy, nag without appearing rude, and operate comfortably in different cultural settings. You need someone with the capacity to develop recruitment messages, write clearly, and work with the media. The coordinator needs to understand the issues that citizens will want to address, and be sensitive to the fact that there are many different valid viewpoints on any topic. Good facilitation skills are critical to manage citizen discussions, to run steering committee meetings, and to train other facilitators. Finally, mobilizing large numbers of citizens can be such a circus that the staffer at the hub of the effort must be able to tend all the logistical details with meticulous care.

Many of the technical assistance organizations listed in the Resource section can provide important services, either free of charge (since some of them are operating foundations) or for a fee. They can:
- Produce discussion materials
- Train facilitators

- Moderate large-group meetings
- Provide keypad voting devices or other technological aids
- Create and maintain websites, bulletin boards, blogs, and other online tools

Responding to organizers from the community

Sometimes the staffing challenge will already have been solved for you: a community organization will take the lead on a particular project. But while this may ease the burden on local government, it also introduces new challenges. The project is unlikely to succeed without at least some level of governmental support, endorsement, or participation – and if it fails, it may damage the trust between citizens and government and affect your ability to make progress on a particular issue. It is important to be able to evaluate the capacity of a community group to implement a democratic governance project.

Mobilizing citizens is more difficult than it sometimes appears. Officials, activists, and other organizers often underestimate the time and effort it takes to recruit large numbers of people, recruit residents who haven't traditionally been involved in public life, structure the meetings, and ensure that the project leads to outcomes that are clear and verifiable. In assessing the capacities of potential organizers, here are some factors to consider:

Staffing needs – If the organizers do intend to recruit large numbers of people, they will probably need a staff person (full-time in a big city, perhaps part-time in a smaller community) just to handle recruitment. Have the organizers planned for this? Do they have a 'donated' staffer from a community organization, or do they have the funding to hire someone? If the organizers are planning to hire an out-of-town consultant as the main coordinator or organizer, what kind of local infrastructure will be left when the consultant leaves? Involving large numbers of people usually requires at least 3-6 months of planning and organizing – how long will the funding or support be available?

Facilitators or moderators – Most of the formats for democratic governance employ facilitators or moderators of some kind. Sometimes another organization (i.e., a national organization or a local or state mediation center) can provide this kind of technical assistance. How

Technical assistance examples

Many of the communities highlighted in this guide received assistance from a nonprofit organization that works on democratic governance issues.

- The "Eugene Decisions" program (p. 13) was designed by the Deliberative Democracy Project.
- The projects in Kuna, ID (p. 44), Buffalo, NY (p. 28), and Decatur, GA (p. 15), received free assistance from the Study Circles Resource Center.
- America*Speaks* has helped Washington, DC run a series of "Citizen Summits" on budget and planning issues, involving thousands of people.

For more information, see the Resource section, p. 63.

will the organizers handle this? What do they expect the costs to be? How will they evaluate the trainers or facilitators, so that they can learn from the project and improve over time? How will they allow for participation by residents who do not speak English?

Research and writing – Most processes require written materials that inform the participants and help structure the sessions. Sometimes the organization supporting a particular process can provide guides; other processes require a locally produced guide. Even when the process uses an institutional generic guide, it probably will be helpful to provide participants with information on race-related issues in their community, including statistics on topics such as segregation and demographic change. How will the organizers meet this challenge? Can they produce information that is clear and unbiased? Will the material be available in different languages?

Outreach capacity – To involve large numbers of people – particularly if you want people representing a range of backgrounds – you need to reach out to the groups and organizations they belong to, and convince leaders in those settings to help you make the pitch. Do the organizers have access to a broad and diverse network of groups and organizations? Do they already have credibility in different parts of the community? If the main coordinator will be an out-of-town consultant, does this person have sufficient local connections to manage the recruitment process? Can the organizers describe the project in such a concise and compelling way that organizational leaders will want to recruit people from their varied constituencies?

Budget and fundraising – For a democratic governance effort to be successful, it has to be 'owned' by the community. One way to judge this is to look at where the money is coming from and where it is going – how much of the budget is allotted for local staffers, trainers, and facilitators, and how much is earmarked for out-of-town consultants? Have the organizers already raised enough money? Do they have good fundraising prospects, or are they counting on local government to either provide funds or approach funders?

Once you have a picture of the strengths and weaknesses of a potential democratic governance project, you can begin to decide what role (if any) local government might play. There are several main possibilities:

"Local government is one of the lead partners in this effort" – In some situations, the best arrangement is for government to share the burden equally with one or two community organizations. This setup combines the credibility of government with the credibility of other groups, making it clear that the project is broad-based and nonpartisan. The responsibility of funding, staffing, and housing the effort would be split among the partners.

"Local government is a friend to the project" – The project could be entirely separate from government, but still have the enthusiastic support of public officials. Local officials might convene a meeting to convince community organizations and other leaders to

support the effort, work to connect organizers with other key contacts, or use speeches, newsletters, press conferences, and other media tools to promote the project with the general public.

"Local government will assist citizens who want to work on action ideas that emerge from the project" – It may not seem appropriate for local officials to endorse, influence, or actively support a project, but there are still ways for government to assist the citizens who participate in the effort. Government can supply information on local conditions, provide advice to citizens who are working on a particular action idea, and offer opportunities for citizens to make recommendations on public policy.

Finally, some local governments have played a key role in situations where more than one democratic governance effort is being organized at the same time. Officials can convene the organizers of the different projects and encourage them to compare notes, find ways to support each other, avoid unnecessary competition, and sometimes even to combine their efforts.

Step 4 – Recruiting for numbers and diversity

To be successful at democratic governance, you must be committed to outreach: the more people you can involve in this kind of work, the more successful your efforts will be. You should begin by assembling a small set of key stakeholders or a pilot group of citizens, but if you want to reap all the benefits of active citizenship and build connections for the long term, you will have to think big. A large, diverse, 'critical mass' of citizens is almost always more powerful, representative, and effective than a small, homogeneous group.

The size of this 'critical mass' will depend on the scale of your project. Within a typical neighborhood, 50-100 citizens might be considered a sufficient number, especially if they represent a range of backgrounds. For a citywide effort, your goal might be several hundred to several thousand participants.

There may be certain segments of the community that you particularly want to have in the mix. If there is a major policy decision at stake, for example, it will be crucial to have public officials and other key decision makers involved in the dialogue. If there is a major conflict in the community, it will be important to recruit people on both sides of that divide. You may want to pay special attention to recruiting young people, low-income people, or people who simply haven't been active in the community before.

This kind of comprehensive recruitment may not always be possible or worthwhile. You simply may not have enough time to reach large numbers of people. If the issue or decision you are tackling seems particularly narrow or technical, it may be very difficult to reach beyond a small set of stakeholders. In these situations, you may still want to use some of the other key principles of democratic governance – impartial facilitation, presenting all sides of an issue, etc. – without aiming for a large, diverse

turnout. The key here is to keep in mind that you may not gain the kind of broad-based political support or citizen capacity that a 'critical mass' organizing effort can give you.

Recruitment Task 1: Create shared ownership

You cannot simply announce meetings and expect a wide variety of people to show up. Sending out emails, mailing letters, and advertising in the newspaper usually won't attract many people either. You will need to reach out through all kinds of networks, enlisting the help of different kinds of leaders, so that people are recruited by someone they already know. In other words, successful recruitment is a contact sport: you must directly approach a set of key people, who can directly approach their own sets of people, and so on. These types of introductory meetings are sometimes called one-on-ones.

From the beginning, you need to invite a range of other leaders to be full partners in the effort, helping to set goals and make decisions. As a steering group, agree on what you expect from one another, how often you will meet, and how the responsibilities will be distributed among you. In addition to recruitment, partners may be helpful for:

- Providing facilitators or moderators;
- Demonstrating that the project is balanced and will allow a range of views to be heard;
- Providing necessary funding or in-kind support;
- Providing background information or other materials; or
- Assisting action efforts that emerge from the meetings.

This coalition should change and grow over time, as the project gains credibility in new segments of the community. Periodically, ask the current members, "Who is not at this table, who really should be here?"

Recruitment Task 2: Craft a recruitment message that has broad appeal

In many communities, a compelling issue has served as the catalyst for democratic governance. Some of the most common issues being addressed are race, education, immigration, crime, criminal justice and corrections, growth and sprawl, youth development, economic development, and police-community relations. Some projects have taken on multiple issues, helping citizens address a range of challenges facing the community. Still others have involved citizens in developing city budgets or land use plans.

The words you use to describe the issue are important. In order to involve a wide range of people, you need to frame the issue in an impartial way, so that it covers many different views and possible solutions. For example, "improving the quality of our schools" appeals to a wider array of people than "increasing school funding." Remember that democratic governance is different from advocacy: you are inviting people to grapple with an issue, not trying to convince them to support a particular solution.

The issue should also be described in non-technical language, so that ordinary people feel like they have something to say. For example, "planning and growth" has more appeal than "housing density and minimum setbacks." Citizens are certainly capable of dealing with technical questions, but if you can avoid jargon as much as possible, people will be more likely to participate and better able to get to the root of the issue.

Why would people want to get involved? *(What are* their *interests?)*

Understanding the interests or motivation of the potential participants is just as important as deciding your own priorities. You have to convince people that your project will help them achieve what *they* want, or they won't take part. Try to put yourself in the shoes of the people you are trying to recruit:

- Why would a young person get involved?
- Why would a citizen with conservative (or liberal) views participate?
- Why would a citizen from a particular racial or ethnic group want to take part?

Some people may participate because they are hopeful about what the project can accomplish; others may participate only because they are concerned about how they will be perceived if they don't. As you begin talking about your project with various kinds of people, be sure to ask lots of questions and listen carefully to the answers: people will often tell you the reasons why they will (or won't) get involved.

Finally, you should take into account the community's perceptions of how local government has acted towards citizens in the past. There may have been citizen involvement efforts which were poorly planned, badly implemented, or even manipulative. A new city administration may perceive its engagement efforts as fresh, new, and starting with a clean slate, but some people may view them with a somewhat jaundiced eye, based on a long (and perhaps fuzzy) memory of these past misadventures. You should be prepared to say not only "Here's why this project will be inclusive and effective," but also "Here's how this project is different from what was done in the past."

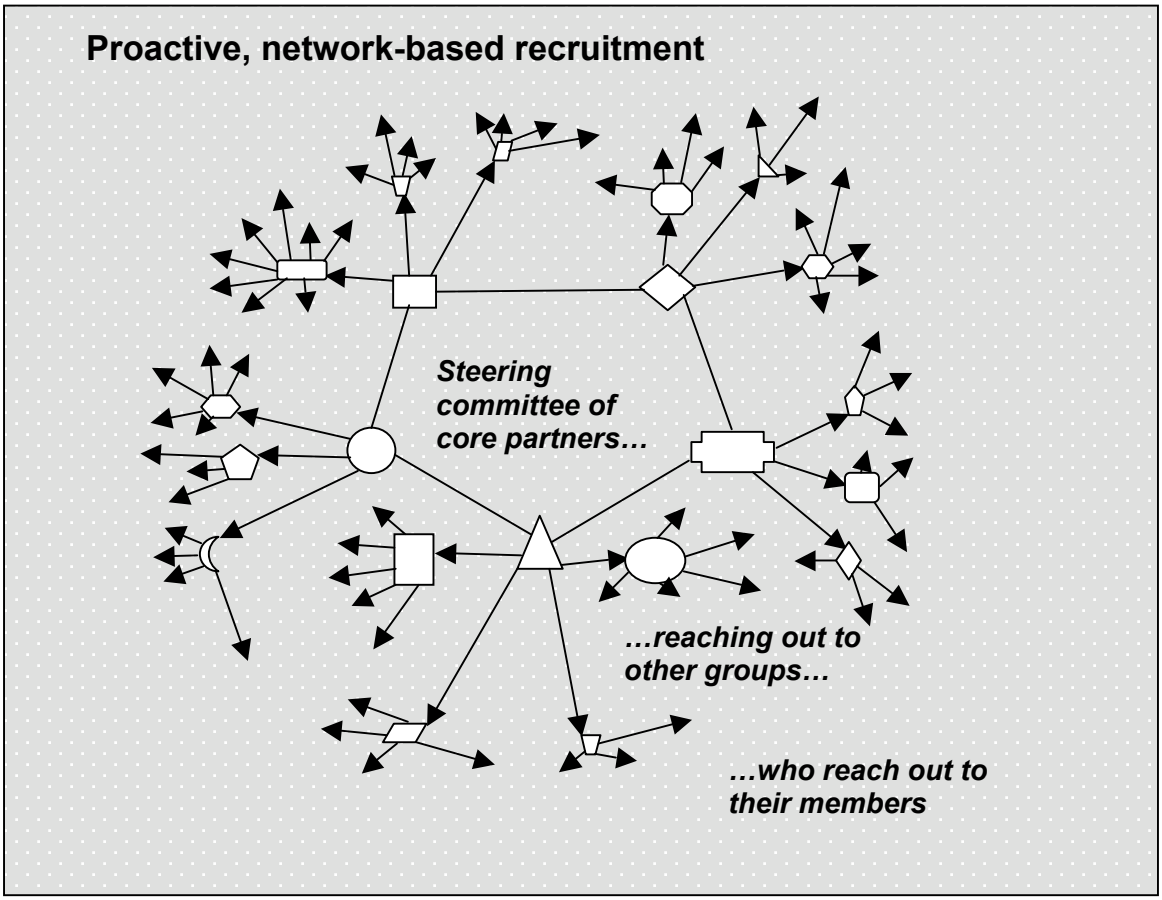
This may be particularly true for people of color, people in poverty, or others who have been on the outside of public decision-making. A project that results in "better" or "more informed" public policies may not be as appealing to them as one that results in greater "fairness" and "equity."(See section on Cultural Competence, p. 35)

Recruitment Task 3: Map community networks in order to reach a wide variety of people

In most communities, the same small set of people shows up at every public meeting. The veteran volunteers and dedicated activists all know one another, and all serve on the same nonprofit boards yet for a democratic governance effort to be effective, you must reach out beyond the usual suspects and locate people through their community connections.

One way to find out how people are connected – and to find the leaders who can help you recruit a variety of citizens – is to identify the institutions, organizations, and groups that they belong to. You might think of this process as "mapping" the clusters of people who make up the community:

- Think about where people worship – list all the churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, and other religious centers. You can sometimes connect with pastors through interfaith or ecumenical councils. You may also be able to reach these



  congregations through their choirs, youth programs, social action committees, and adult education committees.
- Think about where people study – list the high schools, community colleges, and universities. You can start by talking with administrators, but to recruit students, you will need to enlist student leaders.

- Think about where people socialize – list youth groups, sports clubs, ethnic organizations, book clubs, cafés, coffee shops, hair salons, and bowling leagues. Just because social groups aren't considered "political" doesn't mean their members aren't interested in public issues.
- Think about where people work – list all the employers. In some communities, businesses have given time off to employees who wanted to take part in a democratic governance project. In others, businesses hosted democratic small-group meetings for employees during the lunch hour.
- Think about where people talk politics or participate in community service – list political parties, chapters of the League of Women Voters, Rotary and Kiwanis Clubs, sororities and fraternities, YMCAs and YWCAs, and community leadership projects.

In addition to helping you strategize, a map like this can be used as a visual aid. Bring it to planning meetings, invite people to add groups and organizations you hadn't considered, and use it to show your intent to recruit all kinds of people.

Recruitment Task 4: Assist your recruiters

In some communities, democratic governance steering committees have agreed that each member will meet a set recruitment quota, promising to sign up a certain number of people for the project. Sometimes, particular recruiters are given small stipends as a way to free up their time to reach out to a certain segment of the community.

It is critical that the recruiters understand the project. If you are using small-group meetings as the backbone of your project, involve the recruiters in pilot sessions of your process. If you are organizing a large-group meeting, consider holding a 'dress rehearsal' so that the recruiters can visualize how it will work.

Equip your recruiters with written information – this could include flyers, sign-up sheets, and 'blurbs' for newsletters or bulletins. This will help them explain the program and get the necessary information from participants.

One of the most basic and important things to remember is the amount of follow-up required in a large-scale recruitment effort. You are relying on recruiters who already lead busy lives, and they often need polite reminders and firm deadlines to complete all the tasks they take on.

It would be impossible to recruit every single member of your community, but it is important to try. This may seem paradoxical, but your sincerity about proactively trying to recruit the entire community will send an important message to citizens: they will begin to believe that everyone is invited, valued, and welcome.

Remember also that building active citizenship is a cumulative enterprise: you may fall short of your recruitment goals the first time, but as long as you provide those participants with a meaningful political experience, you will be much more likely to get a bigger crowd the next time. Even in the short term, if you can mobilize just 1-2% of the population in your city, you will have a huge critical mass of people and your project will be much more likely to succeed.

Finally, recruitment is a continuous process. It's easy once you have a group of people involved to target your information and communicate primarily with those people. But soon they will become the new "insiders." To keep the process fresh, check your message and your outreach techniques to continue to communicate and to welcome newcomers.

Step 5 – Writing discussion materials

As democratic governance projects become more and more common, it is increasingly apparent that good written materials are critical. No matter what kinds of meetings you organize some kind of guide or set of handouts can help to structure the sessions, provide discussion questions and background information, and present the main views and policy options. You may be able to use or adapt issue guides published by national organizations such as the Study Circles Resource Center, Public Agenda, or the Kettering Foundation.

Community policing circles
Buffalo, New York

Description: Just like many other large cities, police-community relations in Buffalo have often been tense and unproductive. In 2000, the police department began working with the United Neighborhoods Center, an affiliate of the United Way that serves Buffalo's system of block clubs, to help officers and residents work together. The result was a city-wide project that involved 600 residents, including over 250 young people, over a two-year period. In neighborhoods across the city, residents met with police officers and lieutenants, as well as other stakeholders, in multiple-session small-group discussions about the challenges to public safety and ways to surmount them. After the small-group sessions had ended, participants gathered at a city-wide action forum to share their conclusions and highlight action efforts in each neighborhood.
Number of participants/year: 300
Population of community: 292,000
Time spent by participants: 6+ hours
Staffing/funding: Police department and United Neighborhoods Center provided staffing.
How were meetings structured? Circles were facilitated and followed a series of questions and viewpoints in a discussion guide.
Sample outcomes: Redoubling of community policing program by police chief; businesses taking more security precautions to prevent crime; emergency response team to deal with conflicts between business owners and halfway house residents in one neighborhood; residents noticing quicker response times to 911 calls.
Benefits: Improvement in police-community relations and collaboration.
Challenges: Inability to sustain program after police department experienced funding cuts and main United Neighborhoods coordinator moved to another community.

You can supplement your written guides or handouts with other ways of communicating the information: email, websites, video, and presentations by speakers or panelists. Also, because different people learn in different ways (for example, by hearing, by seeing, or by talking), it is important to provide information through multiple means whenever possible.

Two main challenges to think about are balance and accessibility:

- The background information must be factual and non-controversial. This may be more difficult than it first appears: different groups often have different versions of the "facts." These differences need to be acknowledged in the materials given to citizens.
- The choices, approaches, or arguments you want citizens to consider must be described fairly, and none of the major viewpoints should be omitted.
- Accessibility of the information is especially important for the participation of young people, people with lower levels of education, and people who speak little or no English. (Is it provided in plain, jargon-free language? Will translation into other languages be provided? Are graphics, charts, and other visuals effectively used?)

Equip your facilitators or moderators with written materials, but do not ask them to be "experts" who provide their opinions on the topic. To maintain a neutral arena where all views can be expressed, you need facilitators or moderators who can manage the discussion in an impartial way.

How is this different from other kinds of writing?

Developing these kinds of materials requires a different kind of writing than most writers are accustomed to. Many authors – partly those who write primarily for scholarly audiences – are unused to writing in the kind of plain, jargon-free language needed for democratic governance work. The materials should be written at an 8th to 10th grade level, and you may want to include a glossary that will explain some of the most important terms.

An even more important difference is that democratic governance projects present a range of views on the issue at hand. The materials should ask broad, basic questions, such as "How can we balance our city budget?" or "What do we want our high school graduates to know and be able to do?" Typically, the guide will then list a range of possible answers to the question, reflecting a range of viewpoints. Most authors who write on public issues strive to persuade their readers of a particular point of view, and they may have trouble writing views they don't agree with. Some of the 'experts' on a particular issue can have trouble creating materials because it is hard for them to look at the issue from the perspective of ordinary people. For these reasons, you should get feedback on a draft of your materials from a set of people who represent a range of views and backgrounds.

But what if there is a particular conclusion we want people to come to?

Most of the local leaders who are initiating democratic governance projects have strong, well-formed opinions on public issues. They believe that, after taking a hard look at an issue and hearing from other participants, people will emerge from their discussions with ideas and conclusions that aren't too different from the organizers' own. Of course, there is no guarantee that this will happen.

There is one strategy you should not try. Trying to "rig" a project by providing a guide that advocates a particular point of view, or by allowing facilitators to abandon their impartial role, almost always backfires. Participants quickly recognize these kinds of manipulations, and they are likely to become more suspicious of your agenda and of government in general. Belief in democracy means taking a "leap of faith" that reasonable people will come to reasonable conclusions. As an organizer and a writer of materials, you must make it clear that you trust the public and trust your process.

For the issue(s) you are writing about, it may be useful to come up with a "bedrock assumption," a simple statement that almost everyone in the community can agree with. This sentence can then become the guiding idea – and perhaps the title – of your written materials. For example, a bedrock assumption about schools might be that: "Education is important to our community, and everyone can do something to improve it." Notice that this statement does not place blame for the state of education – whatever the reader assumes that to be – on educators, or on inadequate funding from the community, or on any other cause. Arguments about the responsibility of these different groups are made in the form of views in the guide, but they clearly do not fit as bedrock assumptions. Assigning blame would bias the guide and the project, and prevent one group or another from taking part.

When testing this bedrock assumption, think about how it will be perceived by different groups of people. Will people of color, recent immigrants, or people in poverty resonate with it just as strongly as other people? Does the bedrock assumption somehow imply that racism and bias are essentially things of the past? If so, the project may not attract a sufficiently diverse set of participants. Your frame needs to be broad enough to

Good written materials should:

- Provide a baseline of information about the issue(s).
- Give people a sense that their experience counts.
- Provide a structure and suggestions for the meeting(s).
- Encourage people to analyze the basic assumptions and values that underlie their views.
- Help people understand each other's views.
- Help people understand different policy options.
- Introduce viewpoints that may not be represented in the group.
- Help people find common ground and explore areas of disagreement.
- Help the organizers gather information.
- Help people take ownership of action ideas.

accommodate the views of very different constituencies.

One more key to writing balanced, impartial materials is to constantly remind the reader that the guide is a tool for citizens – specifically, for the facilitators and participants in the project. Make it clear that you are not claiming to cover every possible view or action idea. Never list a range of views without inserting a discussion question that asks "Is there a view that is missing? What would you add?" Include questions that honor and refer to their discussion, rather than the guide itself: "What did you learn from your discussion?" rather than "What did you learn from this guide?" The guide is not a curriculum in which they must learn every word; it is designed to help them discuss issues, find common ground, and work together on next steps.

Step 6 – Supporting action efforts at a number of levels

One key to success in democratic governance work is changing your expectations of citizens. It should be clear, from the beginning, that participants are expected to lend some of their own time and energy to the action efforts they generate: the project will do more than just generate recommendations for others to implement.

It doesn't necessarily matter what kinds of actions participants decide to take. The important thing is that they do something: volunteering to help organizations already working on the issue, working in committees or task forces to implement an idea, working within the community organizations they already belong to, or finding ways to affect the policymaking process.

Three basic elements of democratic governance have been critical for helping citizens and organizations take action on critical public issues:

- Structuring meetings in ways that help citizens 'take ownership' of action ideas.
- Creating working relationships between citizens and public officials, and between citizens and public employees.
- Involving large numbers of people and organizations gives everyone a sense that progress is possible: that they are part of a community that is capable of solving its problems.

When you are trying to help citizens implement their action ideas, there are a number of other strategies to consider:

Helping people make connections

Citizens are likely to lose steam if they don't know the people who can help them bring their ideas to fruition. They may need public employees, public officials, social service providers, or other 'practitioners' who have the access and professional expertise to:

- Help make the idea more realistic and workable;
- Help 'pitch' the idea to any decision-makers whose approval may be needed for the idea to move forward;
- Monitor the relationships among the key leaders;
- Help find the necessary resources, financial or otherwise; or
- Implement the idea themselves, because of the authority they already have.

Ideally, these kinds of connections will be made in the meetings themselves (if these kinds of professionals have been successfully recruited). If not, the connection can be made later on. Either way, it is important for an organizer to monitor how the relationship between the professional and the residents is working.

Using large-group events to provide deadlines, support, and recognition

People are more likely to follow through on their promises if they make those commitments publicly in front of a large group of people – AND if they know that they will have to report on their progress at a similar meeting in the future. Whether you are trying to encourage individual volunteers who have signed up to help a cause, small action groups who will be working on a particular action idea, or public officials who have promised to use the input they have received, large-group meetings are critical as both a carrot and a stick.

Helping people find resources

Finding resources can be a daunting challenge, but that is partly because people tend to overlook some of the connections and opportunities that are closest at hand. It may be helpful to provide action groups with assistance in fundraising, grant writing, or similar skills, but make sure you also look to the leaders and stakeholders who already know about the project. The people who serve on your steering committee, or who have attended one of the events, may represent organizations which can provide in-kind or financial resources. They may also know who to talk to in the community to find particular kinds of grants, services, or other forms of assistance. Also, remind action groups that the other residents living in the community (or people who work there) represent a wealth of skills, talents, connections, and other resources themselves. Even if those people did not participate in the meetings, they may be willing and able to contribute to action efforts.

Helping people use data to support their efforts

People are more likely to gain funding and political support for their action ideas if they are able to back up their arguments with research. Many organizers have been able to accomplish this by connecting citizens with university professors or public employees who have the relevant skills and knowledge.

Enlisting the media to help tell the story

Reporters sometimes don't know how to cover democratic governance projects, especially if there are no dramatic conflicts at stake. They often consider these kinds of meetings to be 'just talk.' However, once citizens are actively working to implement their ideas, reporters are quicker to recognize the outlines of the story. It is helpful to contact the media in the early stages of your effort, partly as a way of beginning the relationship – but it is critical to reach out to them as the action forum approaches and as action groups begin moving forward. Articles in the newspaper and segments on television or radio can help to legitimize action efforts and give residents a jolt of confidence and recognition.

Giving people a sense of legitimacy

Once people begin working on an action idea, particularly if it has something to do with public policy, they often start to wonder "Who are we to be doing this?" "Will the 'powers that be' ever take us seriously?" Some action groups have even asked a city council or some other elected body to give them an official title and formally commit to considering the group's conclusions. Whenever possible, work with public officials and other decision-makers to help 'legitimize' the groups – an official title may be useful, but it may be even more powerful for a decision-maker to tell the group in public why their work will be influential and appreciated.

KEY SUPPORT STRATEGIES

Being able to recruit citizens and run productive meetings is clearly essential to making democratic governance work. But there are other capacities that you can develop which will both strengthen your short-term organizing efforts and enrich community life over the long term. Building cultural competence within local government, using the Internet, and working more closely with the media are all important support strategies.

Being inclusive by building cultural competence

When you are planning a democratic governance project, it is important to consider the various ways that your efforts can unintentionally exclude people. You should pay particular attention to how the project will reach people of color, recent immigrants, people in poverty, and other people who have felt – or been – excluded from decision-making in the past. This section is intended to provide a framework for thinking about the disconnects between local leaders and culturally diverse populations, and provide specific questions for you to consider.

Many people use the term "cultural competence" to refer to situations where institutions are interacting well with many different kinds of people. One definition of cultural competence is "a group of skills, attitudes, and knowledge that allows persons, organizations, and systems to work effectively with diverse racial, ethnic, and social groups." In improving cultural competence, there are three main areas to consider: cultural patterns, inter-personal bias, and institutional equity.

Cultural patterns

In almost every community, there is no longer one single mainstream culture or history. Different groups of people have different histories, customs, philosophies, and styles of language.

Cultural competence: Questions to consider

- Are we using the right message to reach a wide variety of people?
- Are the meeting locations accessible for people using public transportation? For people using wheelchairs?
- Will this project help people raise and address questions of interpersonal bias and prejudice?
- Will this project allow people to raise and address questions about whether local government operates fairly and equitably?
- Should materials be available in multiple languages? Are translation services needed?
- Are we establishing a welcoming atmosphere and a wide variety of ways for people to be involved?
- Will the people recruiting for the project be well-received by all the people they are trying to recruit?
- Will the project be structured so that a wide range of perspectives about racism and bias will be accepted as valid viewpoints?
- Will the effort be described in a way that acknowledges perceptions about past incidents and inequities?

For some groups, these differences are more entrenched and significant than for others: People who have been on the outside of local politics and public decision-making may have histories and cultural patterns that feel very separate from the rest of the population.

This means that, in order to attract a wide variety of citizens, a democratic governance effort may have to be described in different ways to reach different sets of people. Organizers should always be asking themselves "Are we taking into account the group identity and cultural patterns of all the different kinds of people in this community?" Of course, the best way to ensure that you are addressing this challenge is to have organizers and close allies who belong to the groups you are trying to reach.

Interpersonal bias

Many people do not recognize the key role that subtle bias and prejudice plays in everyday interactions. Often, people of color feel that elected officials, other local leaders, or public employees may be consciously or (more likely) unwittingly affected by prejudice and stereotypes when they interact with people who are unlike themselves. In contrast, people without strong personal ties to historically disadvantaged communities often assume that interpersonal bias plays a very small role in these interactions.

Whether or not you think bias and prejudice affects these interactions is not the main point: the fact is that these perceptions exist, and they have an impact on whether people can communicate and work together. So organizers should ask themselves: "How can the democratic governance effort help people raise and address questions of bias and prejudice?"

Institutional equity

A final question has to do with people's perceptions about how fairly – or unfairly –resources are distributed among different populations in the community. In many cases, local leaders believe that past problems of unfairness have been essentially resolved. Leaders sometimes expect people of color to recognize that, though the community is not perfect, their elected representatives are acting with good intentions.

On the other hand, groups of people who have been excluded in the past may perceive that current arrangements still reflect decades-old patterns of unfairness. They may feel that local government is not sufficiently committed to redressing these concerns. In order to have credibility in many part of the community, local leaders may have to deal with these perceptions about unfairness, both past and present.

Working with the media

Daily newspapers and other media outlets can be extremely strong allies for your efforts, and they also present particular challenges. The media has the capacity to significantly assist and enrich a democratic governance project, by:

- Encouraging people to participate, and aiding the recruitment effort in other ways;
- Endorsing the project;
- Ensuring that their coverage of the issue or decision being addressed is timed so that the articles can be used to inform the discussions;
- Extending their coverage so that it becomes part of the project itself – providing participants with background information, describing the main views or policy options, or illustrating some of the more common action ideas;
- Summarizing the recommendations and action ideas that emerge from the project;
- Informing participants in one neighborhood council or discussion group about the concerns raised and conclusions reached by participants in other parts of the city.

Media roles in democratic governance

Newspapers and other media organizations have played a wide range of roles in public dialogue efforts. Some examples:

- As part of the "Portsmouth Listens" project on growth and planning in that New Hampshire city, the *Portsmouth Herald* produced and published a report summarizing the conclusions reached by the participants.
- To give participants at the city's Education Summit a better sense of the challenges facing the school system, the *Hamilton* (Ont.) *Spectator* published a series of articles covering some of the main issues.
- A consortium of radio stations in upstate New York devoted substantial coverage to the "Balancing Justice in New York State" project on corrections policy, airing excerpts from some of the small-group discussions.
- The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* helped recruit citizens for a project initiated by the Centers for Disease Control on how to prepare for a flu pandemic. The paper drew on its email distribution list of readers who want to be more involved in public issues.

Some newspapers have been key partners in democratic governance projects, and a few have even initiated these kinds of efforts by themselves. In some places, television and radio stations have also endorsed and given coverage to these efforts. In justifying their support for democratic governance, editors and news directors often cite their journalistic responsibility to generate and enrich public dialogue. Others point out that when people take a strong interest in local issues and decisions, they are more likely to read the local newspaper and pay attention to the local news.

On the other hand, journalists also have a responsibility to be independent 'watchdogs' for the community. That is why some editors and reporters shy away from supporting democratic governance efforts – they feel that their affiliation with a project would prevent them from covering it objectively. Even when journalists give

their support for a project, you cannot assume that they will be giving any kind of immunity to the public officials involved in the effort.

When looking for allies, the major daily newspaper, radio station, or television station may be at the top of your list. But there are probably other media outlets which can help you reach particular audiences. Don't forget 'ethnic' newspapers and radio stations, weekly newspapers, and community access television.

The best way to attract the support of media organizations is to:

- Ensure that several other community organizations have signed on first – this sends the message that your democratic governance effort already has a broad base of support, and does not merely reflect the agenda of local government;
- When meeting with journalists, describe the ways that media outlets in other communities have supported democratic governance (see box);
- Ask journalists to be a supporting partner to the project – talk about the potential roles listed above;
- Make it clear that you expect them to be constructive critics of the project, and of local government's work on this issue.

Rochester's NeighborLink Network

The outcomes of the Neighbors Building Neighborhoods project in Rochester (see p. [x]) ranged from high-profile policy decisions to tiny volunteer projects. Tracking them all was an enormous task in itself. In order to help citizens quantify their progress, the city used federal funds to create the NeighborLink Network, an information management system that shows, by percentage of goals achieved, how well each neighborhood has been doing on the implementation of its most recent plan. At every public library in Rochester, residents can use Global Information System (GIS) mapping technology, access web-sites for each NBN sector, find grant sources and available volunteers, and direct questions to the city's Neighborhood Empowerment Teams.

Making the most of the Internet

Websites, email, and other online tools are now being used much more often, and much more effectively, in democratic governance projects. The Internet allows you to reach large numbers of people cheaply and instantaneously. As local officials and public employees gain experience with these tools, they begin to use the more interactive functions rather than using them to simply broadcast information.

Online basics

There are multiple ways to use the Internet. Email, which is more widely used than the web, can communicate a private message to one individual, or an electronic newsletter or action alert to many people. A listserv is a set of people who email each other about a particular topic; each message goes to the entire group. Email is effective for outreach because even though there is no certainty that the recipient will

read it or act on it, you can be relatively sure that it is received by the people you choose.

Websites are more passive modes of interaction in contrast to an email. But more and more people are expecting to check websites at any time of day for information. When well maintained, web-sites can give people the information they want and entice them to get more involved. They can display eye-catching graphics, and give the user access to documents, programs, databases, electronic bulletin boards, online forms, and video and audio clips.

Some web-sites are interactive because they contain bulletin boards or group "blogs" (short for weblogs) that encourage dialogue and information exchange. Bulletin boards allow anyone to "post" a comment on a particular topic; other people may then post their own comments. In group blogs, subjects of all messages (or "postings") appear on a web-site, in the order they were submitted; this allows participants to scan submissions more quickly to determine what they want to read. Both of these technologies can be facilitated by an online moderator who asks questions, proposes topics, organizes the information, and decides whether postings can appear

Finally, there are also technologies for simultaneous online dialogue. These programs attempt to reproduce a face-to-face discussion: participants in different locations are assigned to a particular group, and their posted comments appear on the screen. The facilitator acts in much the same way as a facilitator in a face-to-face discussion: remaining impartial, helping the group set and enforce ground rules, observing the time constraints, and helping the group use the discussion materials.

What the Internet can do

As a complement to democratic governance, the Internet offers all kinds of capacities for local government to tap into. These can be categorized according to a sliding scale, from the basic goal of providing information to the more advanced objective of promoting community-wide dialogue and action:

A note of caution: making greater use of the Internet will not automatically expand the number of people involved in talking about and taking action on public issues. Unless you are launching a proactive recruitment effort (in which broadcast emailing could be one of the strategies, but not the only one), the people who visit your website or email city departments are likely to be the same citizens who already attend public meetings and are already connected to government. They are also likely to fit the typical profile of computer users: wealthier and better educated than the average resident (see "Equity and the Internet," below).

Goal	Online Tool	Type of Communication
Provide information to people who are already looking for it	Website	One-way, passive
Provide information to people who may or may not be looking for it	Broadcast emails	One-way, proactive
Recruiting people to attend public meetings or take part in democratic governance efforts	Broadcast emails	One-way, proactive
Connect citizens with the appropriate city department or office	Website with a directory of email addresses for city departments and staff	Two-way, between individuals
Generate discussion and gather input from the people most affected by a particular issue or decision	Bulletin boards and blogs	Two-way, among small groups of people
Actively support face-to-face democratic governance efforts	Website that provides background information, provides updates on action efforts; listservs, bulletin boards, and blogs to supplement face-to-face dialogue; websites for neighborhood councils; database that helps citizens track goals and action ideas	Two-way, among larger numbers of people

Equity and the Internet

Using the Internet as an outreach tool and to notify people about meetings raises issues about equity and inclusiveness. Many people lack either the skills or the wherewithal to access web sites or receive email. Cities will have to address this "digital divide" as they improve their websites and other e-democracy tools. In addition, cities will need to be sure they're using "old-fashioned" techniques like mass mailings, hand -delivered flyers and bulletin boards, not solely relying on attractive and easy Internet tools.

Other equity concerns are somewhat easier to address. Accommodating citizens with disabilities is primarily a matter of website design. Nonprofit organizations can help cities assess how well their sites measure up to accessibility standards like the ones published by the World Wide Web Consortium (for one example of an assessment tool, see http://www.cast.org/bobby).

Websites also need translation features for residents who do not speak English. Cities like Orlando provide the entire text of their websites in Spanish. Both the cities of Philadelphia and Nashville have flag links on the bottom of their homepages that automatically translate (via an external translation site) to a number of languages, including French, Spanish, German, Japanese and Korean.

While the Internet can be an important tool for improving democratic governance, it cannot be the only tool. Proactive, network-based recruitment is essential for attracting citizens who would not normally flock to websites or traditional public meetings. Face-to-face meetings are critical for encouraging social interaction, active listening, and accountability for action plans.

THE LONG TERM: KEEPING PEOPLE INVOLVED IN PUBLIC LIFE

"When we started organizing our Strong Neighborhoods Initiative (SNI), we didn't realize what a major change this would turn out to be," says Mark Linder, assistant city manager of San José, California. "The more we asked citizens to change, to take a more active role in public life, the more we realized that local government had to change as well." Other officials who have been long-time pioneers in democratic governance will often say similar things: involving citizens and community organizations in more meaningful ways often inspires other changes in the way that government functions.

This section is designed to help you think through these possibilities, first by assessing how community is functioning and then by exploring different options for change.

Assessing the state of democracy in your community

Before you establish a new neighborhood council system, reshape how citizens can access City Hall, or make any other long-term changes in local governance, it makes sense to take stock of how your community is functioning now. There are five key things you need to know:

- The networks that connect people
- The extent of cultural barriers and other kinds of divisions
- Whether people have a strong sense of place
- The strength of neighborhood associations and other grassroots groups
- The effectiveness of local media.

It can be difficult to gauge any of these things objectively, even when you know your community well. The following surveys and charts may help you organize your thinking.

Identifying assets and challenges: An informal survey

1. What are the different ways in which you interact with citizens? How does the effectiveness of those meetings vary according to the format or setting?
2. When you look at the citizens who show up to public meetings, or who are involved in problem-solving efforts, do you see all the same people?
3. Are some neighborhoods, churches, workplaces, etc. more active in the community than others? Are some not active at all? Why?
4. How diverse – by race and ethnicity or by other kinds of cultural differences – are the people who get involved in public life, the political process, and local problem-solving?
5. How diverse – by age – are the people who get involved in public life, the political process, and local problem-solving?

6. How many opportunities are there for people of different cultural backgrounds to interact and work together?
7. How many opportunities are there for people of different age groups to interact and work together?
8. How active and representative are the neighborhood associations, block clubs, neighborhood councils, or other citizen structures? How many of these groups can turn out large numbers of citizens on a regular basis?
9. Are community organizations or neighborhood groups helping to provide services and solve problems? Are they partnering with local government to provide services?
10. When you want input on a policy decision, to whom do you turn? Do you have opportunities to get input from ordinary citizens – and if so, what kind of information do you get? Is it difficult to figure out what people want you to do?
11. Aside from tax revenues, what financial resources do you draw upon? Is there an active community foundation, and are corporations, individual philanthropists, and other foundations focused on the community?
12. Are there effective media outlets that serve the community? (In addition to newspapers, television, and radio, remember weekly papers, neighborhood newsletters, ethnic radio stations, and public access TV.) How community-minded is the local media?
13. Are there websites that serve the community, and do they seem to be used by large numbers of

Kuna ACT
Kuna, Idaho

Description: The population of Kuna, which is west of Boise, has grown from 600 to 6,000 in the last decade. After repeated conflicts over issues of growth and school funding, an organization called the Kuna Alliance for a Cohesive Community Team (Kuna ACT) was formed to foster better communication. Whenever a major policy question arises, Kuna ACT organizes an informational forum followed by a series of small-group circle discussions. An average of six forum/circles have been held each year for the last five years.
Number of participants/year: 500
Time spent by participants: 4+ hours.
Staffing/funding: Every major organization in the community makes a small donation ($500-$3,000) to support the time of the Kuna ACT coordinator.
Role in the political process: Kuna ACT is an independent nonprofit which serves as an intermediary between citizens and government. All organizations are invited to submit topics to Kuna ACT; topics are submitted most frequently by city council, school board, and land use committee. Public officials and employees often make presentations at the forums and will also participate in the small-group discussions.
How are meetings structured? Forums are straightforward, with a series of speakers; small-group circles are facilitated and follow a series of questions provided by Kuna ACT.
Sample outcomes: Establishment of Kuna as hub of a "Birds of Prey" area; improvements made to downtown; construction of high school using input gathered from young people and adults.
Benefits: Input gathered on practically every major and minor policy decision; reduction of tension around community conflicts.
Challenges: With some issues, not enough follow-up work to involve citizens in helping to implement policies.

people?
14. Do people identify with their community? Do they take pride in where they live?
15. Does local government have credibility with a wide variety of people in the community?

How can people "get involved"?

Political capital

In any community, there are probably many different ways to get involved in public life, the political process, and attempts to solve local problems. Here's a basic checklist – you can probably list additional ways that work in your community.

An additional piece of information to consider is voter turnout. The overall level of turnout provides one yardstick; examining turnout according to age, cultural background, and socioeconomic status can be more revealing.

Some of the ways for people to get involved are more frustrating than gratifying. For each of the opportunities on the checklist, ask:

- Does the atmosphere at the meetings make the average participant feel comfortable speaking?
- When people speak, do they feel like they've been heard?
- During the meetings, do participants speak and listen to one another, or primarily to the group leaders?
- Do the average participants take home tangible responsibilities and tasks? Do they complete them?
- How do people know when their participation has made some kind of an impact on the community?
- Is there some kind of written record of the meetings? How is it disseminated?
- Does the group attract a wide range of people, or do most of them look and think the same?
- Is the turnout steady, or do people attend only when a crisis has occurred?

A basic measure of the effectiveness of a group is whether people continue to participate in it – in that sense, they are 'voting with their feet'

A list of groups and examples of group participation is provided below.

GROUP	EXAMPLE
Public meetings	City council, school board, zoning board, etc.
Neighborhood groups and organizations	Active membership in neighborhood associations, neighborhood councils, CDC boards, block clubs, neighborhood watch groups, homeowners' associations, etc.
School groups and organizations	Active membership in PTAs, local school councils, etc.
Youth groups and organizations	Youth involvement in boards and commissions, leadership opportunities for youth, service learning in schools, etc.
University-based clubs and organizations	Those that focus on public issues.
Opportunities at the workplace	Unions, volunteer opportunities based at work
Opportunities within faith communities	Community/social action committees, volunteer opportunities based at church
Service clubs	Kiwanis, Rotary, Elks, Lions, Eastern Star
Local political parties	
Groups devoted to integrity of the political process –	League of Women Voters
Ethnic associations and advocacy groups	NAACP, La Raza, Urban League, etc.
Volunteer opportunities	United Way, Catholic Charities, sororities and fraternities, etc.
Traditional community organizing projects	ACORN, PICO, Gamaliel, IAF, etc.
Planning and visioning efforts	Either for the whole community or for a particular neighborhood
Dialogue projects	Those that bring together people of different racial, ethnic, or religious backgrounds.
Adult education opportunities	Ones that are explicitly focused on public issues.
Nonprofit boards	
Organizations that serve recent immigrants and help them become politically active	
Environmental groups and organizations	Sierra Club, Surfriders, etc.
Leadership programs of various kinds	
Advisory boards for the police department or other city agencies	

Social capital

In addition to the opportunities listed above, there are many other groups and organizations that bring citizens together. These 'places people gather' may not (yet) provide them a meaningful chance to get involved in public life, but if they attract residents – and give people a sense of membership and belonging – then they are important pillars of the community. They may not represent "political capital" like the groups in the first list, but they certainly represent "social capital": the extent to which residents know one another and are able to work together.

Mapping these networks, and reaching out to their leaders, can be a critical step for recruiting large, diverse numbers of people.

GROUPS PEOPLE BELONG TO	PLACES WHERE THEY CONGREGATE
Businesses	Local, county, and state government
Faith congregations	Police stations and substations
Youth clubs	Firehouses
Sports teams	Restaurants, cafés, and coffee shops
Musical groups	Gyms and studios
Fraternities and sororities	Hair salons
Senior centers	Grocery stores
Historic preservation groups	Bars and pubs
Libraries	Shelters
Universities and community colleges	On-line communities
Schools	Recreation centers and community centers

How do people get their community information?

Knowing how people get their information can help you understand their attitudes and assumptions about their community. Mapping the local media can also help you decide how to recruit participants for meetings and projects. There are four main questions to consider:

1. *What are the local media outlets?* The most prominent local media are probably television and radio stations, and the major daily newspaper. However, there may be other outlets which reach significant numbers of people: Spanish-language newspapers or radio stations; media outlets devoted to other languages and ethnic communities; media outlets devoted to the African-American community; talk radio stations devoted to a particular political viewpoint; local magazines; weekly newspapers which cover public issues as well as the entertainment scene; local public televisions stations; community access cable channels; and even 'pirate' radio stations.

2. *How much local content is there?* In some communities, the media outlets focus on state or national news at the expense of local news. In smaller towns, most of the

stories may be provided by national newswires; even in bigger suburbs, the central city may dominate the coverage.

3. *How much difference is there in the coverage provided by different outlets?* Over the course of a week, compare the local news coverage in as many different media outlets as you can find. Are there differences between the Spanish-language coverage and the English-language reports? How do the television newscasts compare with the newspaper articles? How do the daily and weekly newspapers differ?

4. *How intensive is the coverage?* Many journalists rely on the most readily available, easy-to-use sources of information: the police blotter, press releases issued by local government and other organizations, and opinion polls. Others have the opportunity to delve more deeply into the issues and challenges facing the community.

What are you missing?

In order to develop a comprehensive overall strategy for democratic governance, try to assess how your community is meeting the following goals:

- Ensuring that citizens are informed and connected, and helping them understand their public responsibilities;
- Resolving conflicts and bridging divisions in the community;
- Involving citizens in important policy decisions, or in the development of a plan;
- Generating new solutions to community problems, and encouraging citizens and citizen groups to help implement action efforts;
- Forging working relationships between citizens, public officials, and public employees;
- Involving new people who haven't been active in the community before; and
- Providing leadership skills and connections for all kinds of people.

For each goal, list what kinds of opportunities are provided in the community, either by local government or by other organizations. Also evaluate whether these opportunities are well-known, and whether they coordinate well with one another. Some democratic governance efforts may achieve more than one goal – or perhaps all of them – to some degree.

Goal	Opportunities	Well-known?	Well-coordinated?

Establishing neighborhood councils and other structures

In their efforts to find out what citizens want from government, and how residents and public employees can work together, some local officials have created new citizen structures, smaller public arenas that are much closer (literally and figuratively) to where people live.

These are different from traditional neighborhood associations: they are official bodies, recognized by the city, and they play an official, routine role in decision-making for their area of the city. Most of these "neighborhood councils," "planning districts," or "priority boards" are designed to both gather input on policy decisions and embolden citizens to take action themselves. The core idea is that local government shares some of its authority and resources with the new citizen structures.

Local leaders cite a mix of economic and political reasons for sharing power with neighborhoods. The Los Angeles neighborhood council system was launched soon after sections of the city threatened to secede and set up their own local governments. Rochester initiated Neighbors Building Neighborhoods as part of its effort reverse twenty years of disinvestment and 'white flight.' Some of the oldest systems, in

places like Dayton, Ohio, Saint Paul, Minnesota, and Birmingham, Alabama, emerged from the federal anti-poverty efforts of the 1960s.

These neighborhood structures vary in several ways. Some of them are purely advisory groups which provide input to local government, most commonly to the police and planning departments. Others have the power to make certain decisions themselves. Usually these are choices focused on their neighborhood alone, but not always: in Dayton, the neighborhood "priority boards" have veto power over the city budget. Some neighborhood structures must follow procedures and processes dictated by government in order to be "certified," while others receive advice and assistance from government but are not compelled to manage their affairs in any particular way. Still others are left entirely to their own devices, with no dictates or support from the city. In some places, city staff are always present at neighborhood meetings, either to facilitate them or to provide information; in other communities, staff are rarely involved.

How to design and form citizen structures

There are a number of factors to consider when you are designing a structure such as a neighborhood council system. The unique political and financial circumstances facing your city may help you decide which option is the best fit. In most cases, the backbone of your system will be the set of neighborhood-level structures that give citizens regular opportunities to talk with one another, learn about issues and services, and plan for action. Different communities have set these up in different ways:

1. *Empower existing neighborhood associations or other groups.* Some communities already have neighborhood associations, block clubs, homeowners' associations, neighborhood watch, or other groups that seem to be functioning effectively. Rather than setting up new councils, local governments sometimes give new powers and responsibilities to these existing groups. This avoids the problem of drawing boundaries that seem unnatural or not in keeping with a city's history.

   To be successful, this approach relies on neighborhood associations being truly participatory, representative, and dynamic. If neighborhood leaders lack the skills or willingness to involve a wide variety of other residents, this strategy can further alienate people from their local government.

2. *Set criteria for councils and let groups of neighbors apply.* Another approach is to establish a set of criteria for how the councils will act (how they will recruit members, elect leaders, conduct planning, etc.) and then let groups of neighbors submit a proposal. From year to year, the number of neighborhood councils may change, as new groups are formed and others fall by the wayside. This setup allows self-determination by the neighborhoods and requires them to function effectively. In this approach, the staff support for the councils may be housed at

City Hall, rather than at district offices throughout the city and the staff hold the council accountable if they aren't living up to the criteria.

3. *Form districts that include multiple neighborhoods.* In some instances, local governments have formed neighborhood councils by carving out new districts. Usually this means that separate neighborhoods, often with existing neighborhood associations, will be working together as part of a single district. The most straightforward reason for this kind of setup is that the city doesn't have enough money to provide staff support for every single neighborhood, so it is necessary to group neighborhoods so they can share staff. However, there can be other advantages: some staffers feel that redrawing the boundaries can produce a needed shake-up, forcing neighborhood associations to work together, and allowing new leaders to emerge. In addition, where the city council and neighborhood council districts share the same boundaries, it can be difficult to convince citizens – and council members – that the new groups are more than simply advisory committees for the council members.

Some cities have set up two-tiered systems, empowering existing neighborhood groups while also adding a set of districts that encompass multiple neighborhoods.

Other communities have added a third tier: a city-wide committee or council that includes representatives from all the different neighborhood councils. Examples include the "Congress of Neighborhoods" in Los Angeles and the "City Neighborhood Council" in Seattle. This kind of body can serve as a conduit for neighborhood input to city council; handle issues that affect two or more neighborhoods; and facilitate communication between city department heads and the neighborhood councils.

How to provide staffing and support

Neighborhood councils require some kind of staffing in order to be effective. Recruiting participants, building relationships with other organizations, facilitating meetings, connecting with local officials and public employees, and sending out information about issues and results are all time-consuming tasks.

These do not necessarily have to be government-funded positions. Many neighborhood associations hire staff by raising their own funds through grants, donations, or dues, and in some situations, a particularly committed volunteer can fill the role. Maintaining a stable network of neighborhood councils requires that the city and the neighborhood leaders come up with a plan that will ensure stability in funding.

There are also different ways of deploying staffers:

1. *Assigning staffers to the neighborhood councils***.** In some systems, each district office is almost a "mini-City Hall," with a full-time staff person who helps citizens connect with different government departments and services, as well as providing support to the neighborhood council.

2. *Neighborhood staff with assistance from a central city office.* Other communities rely on the neighborhoods themselves to hire their own staff on an as-needed basis; the city may provide grants to cover at least part of the cost, or simply provide advice and assistance with fundraising. The city will then provide technical support from a central city office, sending staffers out to meet with councils, make presentations, or train facilitators.

3. *Establishing a training program for neighborhood leaders.* Neighborhood council staffers, board members, and other kinds of leaders can receive instruction in topics like broad-based recruitment, meeting management, working with volunteers, budgeting, the zoning process, and database design.

How to help the councils make plans and implement them

Most neighborhood councils go through some kind of planning process. Cities make different assumptions about who 'owns' such a plan, and who is responsible for implementing it.

In some communities, the city already has a certain amount of money for neighborhood improvements, often raised through a bond issue, and local

Neighbors Building Neighborhoods
Rochester, New York

Description: Neighbors Building Neighborhoods (NBN) is a citizen-based planning and community action process that was initiated in 1993. City staff work with teams of residents – one for each sector of the city – to map assets, create community vision statements, and develop priorities for community action. In addition to providing citizen engagement in the Rochester 2010 Plan, the process supports new partnership and funding sources for neighborhood priorities.
Number of participants/year: 6,300
Population of community: 219,000
Time spent by participants: 6+ hours per month for sector leaders, including individual sector meetings and monthly sector chairs meeting. Can be substantially higher for volunteers working on sector-sponsored events and projects.
Staffing/funding: City employees provide technical assistance to the sector committees; action efforts are accomplished through volunteer efforts, business contributions, and government responses to sector priorities.
Sample outcomes: New zoning ordinance focusing on design and community character; new system of neighborhood-based code enforcement/police teams; an award-winning urban farming project. Over 80% of the action ideas in the original NBN neighborhood plans have been implemented.
Benefits: Moving the model of citizen input from confrontation to collaboration expanded citizen involvement at all levels of planning and decision making.
Challenges: Building partnerships outside the city to address underlying issues of economic disparities and regional sprawl. Recruiting new citizen volunteers to replace those lost to burnout or leaving for new jobs elsewhere.

officials ask the neighborhood councils for input on how to spend it. In San Jose, California, the main reason for the creation of the city's Strong Neighborhoods Initiative was to allocate $120 million in redevelopment money. When Los Angeles established its neighborhood council system in 2001, the city council committed to providing $50,000 per year for each council that met the accreditation criteria, to be spent according to the council's neighborhood plan.

In other communities, the purpose of neighborhood planning is to set general priorities for city services. In places like Rochester, the plan for a particular neighborhood could have implications for a number of city departments and other agencies.

Some communities make it clear that the neighborhood council is the group that 'owns' the plan; the city may be able to help with some of the action ideas in it, but citizens and community organizations will have to commit some of their own skills, energy, and financial resources as well. The Seattle Department of Neighborhoods has helped formalize this expectation by establishing a "Neighborhood Matching Fund." Residents and community groups can make contributions in the form of cash, materials, professional services, and volunteer time, and the city will match the pledge. In 2004, a total of $780,357 was contributed to the fund, along with 50,000 hours of volunteer time.

Before beginning any kind of planning exercise, it is important for neighborhood councils and local officials to talk about the assumptions and expectations they are carrying into the process. The plans will be more successful and meaningful if they are produced by people with a clear sense of who will be implementing them, and how.

How to track results and report them

One of the most common mistakes made by organizers of democratic governance efforts is failing to document and report the results of their projects. They sometimes assume that when a project produces an important outcome for a particular neighborhood, the residents will automatically know about it and recognize how it came about.

This can be a critical oversight. People, who haven't participated in the meetings themselves, including potential funders and future participants, will judge them almost entirely on whether or not they led to tangible changes in the neighborhood or community. A brief description in the neighborhood newsletter may not be enough: given the volume of information that people are bombarded with every day, it may take other methods – media coverage, community celebrations, phone trees, or special mailings – to spread the news effectively.

Tracking and reporting on results is also another way to involve citizens. Systems like Rochester's NeighborLink Network (see box on p. 38) allow residents to

document how their neighborhood has been doing on the implementation of its most recent plan. These kinds of interactive, Internet-based information systems – another example is Jacksonville 2020 in Florida – give citizens another meaningful, gratifying role to play in improving their communities.

How to clarify roles and expectations

One fundamental question that will come up, sooner or later, in the establishment of a neighborhood council system is "Who is really in charge?" This question emerges when people are trying to decide how the councils affect local government, and it sometimes also appears in situations where a particular council breaks down and has ceased to function.

Neighborhood councils need a clear sense of the extent and limitations of their authority. In most communities, they serve in an advisory role when it comes to decisions made by city council. They carry a great deal of clout, but they are not the decision-makers. In other communities, neighborhood councils are sometimes given the decision-making role. The bottom line is that, however their authority is defined, citizens and neighborhood council members need to know what kinds of power, benefits and responsibilities come with their participation.

Prioritizing solutions in Seattle

In late 2003, the Seattle Department of Neighborhoods initiated an extensive prioritization process to propel the city's Neighborhood Plans. Each of the 38 neighborhood planning areas came up with their top four or five priorities. With this information, the Department of Neighborhoods entered all the submitted priorities into a database, and created a preliminary report that was shared with other city departments. Over a dozen departments helped evaluate each of the priorities, assigned project managers where appropriate, and shared explanatory comments to promote information sharing, foster better coordination, and ensure the proper department had been assigned the correct project. In addition, the departments used many of the prioritized projects for their own planning purposes, and dozens of projects were added to the departmental 2005-2006 Capital Improvement Plans. Nine months later, 70% of the projects were identified as In-Progress, Completed, or On-Going.

Keeping the neighborhood councils running effectively

The most successful neighborhood council systems allow a great deal of autonomy to each council. Residents should feel like they 'own' their group, that it belongs to them. The freedom to decide how the council functions is an important ingredient for creating that kind of ownership.

Sometimes neighborhood leaders don't have the skills they need to recruit large numbers of people and involve them in participatory ways. This is one reason why staffing is critical for neighborhood councils, but it also dictates that technical assistance be provided in a way that is responsive rather than restrictive and demanding. In other words, people who give technical assistance should be helping

neighborhood residents set goals, and then offering strategies and techniques that will help them achieve those goals.

But there are bound to be situations in which neighborhood councils simply fail to function. The group may make an unfortunate choice in a leader, or prove unable to involve a substantial constituency within the neighborhood, or become immobilized by a controversy. Citizens who are frustrated with their neighborhood council may try to launch a completely separate group of their own.

In order to deal with these kinds of crises, communities need contingency procedures which will allow neighborhood residents, leaders from other neighborhoods, public employees, and local officials to decide together what the problem is and what should be done about it. Here are some ways that communities have been able to overhaul neighborhood councils:

Reviving a group through elections and process changes. Some communities hold elections to fill their neighborhood councils, but in most places, the council members are simply the most active citizens in the neighborhood. It is important for the group to be energetic, committed, and representative of the people who live and work in that area. One of the most basic ways to revive a council is to recruit dynamic new members: map the networks of people in the neighborhood, and find leaders who can represent the segments of the population which have not been as involved in the work of the council.

Other councils apply basic process techniques to help their work together more effectively:

- Limiting the meetings to no more than twelve people (if the board or committee is larger than this, find ways to break it up into smaller segments).
- Using an impartial facilitator (this could be a responsibility that rotates among all the team members, or among several who have the best facilitation skills).
- Establishing ground rules that the group revisits periodically.

Rethinking the format, timing, and location of meetings. Another method for reinvigorating a group is to re-think the way meetings are held. There are two main questions here: "Are the council's regular meetings participatory, enjoyable, and effective?," and "Do the meetings provide people a range of incentives to participate?" Improving the meetings may involve:

- Spending the majority of the time in small, facilitated groups.
- Finding new ways to provide information (written or verbal) that gives participants the background on key topics, and/or describes the main options facing the neighborhood in a concise and balanced way.
- Reconciling the need for a constant meeting location and time with the desire to reach out to larger numbers of people (see "Reaching out," below).

Giving people a range of incentives to participate may include:

- Providing food and time for socializing at the beginning or end of the meeting.

- Providing child care.
- Highlighting young people – all kinds of people will take part in something if it involves watching kids (and not just their own kids) dance, sing, act, receive awards, display their artwork, etc.
- Piggybacking on other meetings and events – this could include bingo nights, high school sporting events, etc.

Reaching out to the block level. Block clubs and similar kinds of extremely grassroots groups are used in many communities to reach large numbers of ordinary citizens and enrich membership in neighborhood councils. These groups can provide a very accessible first step for involvement. The key challenges seem to be:
- Recruiting block club leaders.
- Connecting the block club to neighborhood-wide institutions so that there is two-way communication between the levels.

Reaching up to the city level. All kinds of city-level entities can benefit from effective neighborhood councils. This includes governmental bodies like police departments, mayor's offices, city councils, city manager's offices, school systems, zoning boards, other departments in city government, and state or federal agencies. Establishing stronger connections with these kinds of groups can heighten the impact of the neighborhood council, and enhance their ability to recruit citizens. Some questions to consider:
- How can/does the neighborhood council help the city-level group achieve its goals?
- What can the neighborhood council provide them (volunteer time? quality input?) that will help them further?
- How can the city-level group further legitimize the council? Formally asking residents for input on a particular question? Working more closely with citizen-led action efforts? Sending mid-level staffers (i.e. police lieutenants and inspectors rather than beat officers) to neighborhood meetings?
- How can you help residents work together more closely with employees and representatives of city-level groups?

Using ranks, rituals, and recognition. A key to sustaining people's involvement is conveying a sense of political status or legitimacy. All good democratic governance efforts communicate the sense that citizens have a place on the public stage; but there are also specific ways to reinforce it:
- Holding ceremonies to welcome new residents or celebrate new graduates.
- Giving residents particular titles or designations that confer their status and responsibilities.
- Establishing an awards program to recognize people and groups who have contributed to the neighborhood in some way.

Costs of neighborhood council systems: A comparison

It is difficult to compare the costs of neighborhood council systems because there are so many variables. The preceding chart attempts to provide some comparison between different systems.

City and program	Type of system	Budget for staffing/operations	Technical assistance provided by
Rochester, NY (pop. 219,000), Neighbors Building Neighborhoods	Ten sectors, each representing multiple neighborhoods; planning is the central function	NBN Program Budget is $100,000, of which $5,000 is provided for each of the 10 sector groups. Sectors also receive funds from the Sector Targeted Funding Initiative Program (up to $100,000), the Weed & Seed Initiative (up to $10,000), and the Kodak Foundation (up to $10,000) to implement sector plans.	Bureau of Neighborhood Initiatives – staff of six. Operating/staff funds are $414,000.
Los Angeles, CA (pop. 3,912,200), Citywide system of neighborhood councils	86 neighborhood councils; provide input and community impact statements to elected officials, city boards, and commissions on a wide variety of issues, initiatives, legislation	$50,000 annually per neighborhood council from the city	Department of Neighborhood Empowerment – 56 authorized positions; operating budget of $4.3 million
Seattle, WA (pop. 563,000) City Neighborhood Council and Department of Neighborhoods	Thirteen districts, each with a city-paid staffer and each representing multiple neighborhoods; planning is the central function	No separate budgets for districts – total budget for Department is $11 million. In addition to city-paid staffer, each district is also eligible for Neighborhood Matching Fund	Department of Neighborhoods – 93 staff, $11 million budget – plus "expert volunteers" with organizational development skills
Minneapolis, MN (pop. 382,000), Neighborhood Revitalization Program	70 neighborhood groups covering the entire city receive funding for their staffing, developing and implementing neighborhood plans	Each neighborhood group is an independent nonprofit with its own staffing budget and sources of revenue. NRP expended $12 million on neighborhood improvements in 2004.	Neighborhood Revitalization Program – staff of 10, budget of $1.5 million
Dayton, OH (pop. 166,000), priority boards	Seven priority boards, each with city-paid staff and representing multiple neighborhoods; have input and influence over the city budget. The City Commission has the decision-making power.	No separate budgets for priority boards – total budget for Division is $1.5 million. Each board receives $1,000-1,600 stipend in addition to support from city-paid staff (one staffer for up to three boards)	Division of Citizen Participation – staff of 4 (aside from those assigned to priority board offices)

Changing the way public meetings are run

As officials experiment with public dialogues and neighborhood meetings that are more participatory and effective, they often realize that the regular meetings of elected bodies might be improved as well. It may be tempting to think that if we can establish better school and neighborhood governance – creating a better 'ground floor' for democracy, so to speak – then no further changes will be necessary. However, the more that citizens become active in addressing public problems, the more frustrated they become when they encounter governmental bodies that don't meet their goals for participation.

Differences need to be addressed, and because citizens bring such different skills and attitudes than they did before, traditional public meetings are now more ineffective and outdated than ever. The time for citizen comments is usually a large-group session in which people may advance to an open microphone in order to ask questions or make statements. Citizens tend to stay away from public hearings, school board meetings, city council proceedings, and zoning board meetings, mainly because they function in ways that are out of step with the larger changes in the citizen-government relationship.

Citizens may hope or expect that the meeting will allow them to:

- Help make an impact on an issue they care about.
- Provide input that has some kind of effect on public policy decisions.
- Learn more about issues or opportunities facing the community.
- Form connections with decision-makers and other citizens.
- Hone their leadership skills.
- Deal with conflicts in a civil, candid, and non-confrontational way.

When citizen goals go unfulfilled, what's left is the final reason people attend traditional public meetings: to complain. Privately, many public officials will say that they dread these meetings, and much prefer talking with citizens one-on-one or in small groups. This mutual dissatisfaction is one reason why democratic governance efforts are proliferating. Local leaders are setting up permanent neighborhood councils, or organizing temporary dialogue projects, partly because they are tired of traditional public meetings and want other ways of interacting with citizens.

Citizen responsibilities: Getting the message across

It is important to be clear about what a democratic governance effort will allow citizens to do. You may want to emphasize:

- That citizens and community groups will be expected to take action, not just make recommendations for government.
- That policy input given by participants will be carefully considered by public officials.
- That officials will not necessarily agree with all of the policy input.
- That people who have different opinions should try to find common ground, rather than asking public officials to settle the disagreement.

The two main bywords for public meetings are efficiency (making decisions quickly, fairly, and well) and openness (in this case, meaning advance notice of meetings, opportunities for public comment, no confidential discussions, and published minutes or records). Both of these criteria are clearly compatible with democratic governance, but by themselves they do not guarantee successful meetings, and some of the methods for achieving them are out of date. For example, using 'comment periods,' where people may approach an open microphone to ask questions or give their opinions, are seldom satisfactory to either the citizens or the public officials. That time, which can be quite lengthy, might be better spent in facilitated small-group discussions, with the officials mingling with the audience members. On particularly important questions, the board or council members could allow time a separate session where they could deliberate with the public; the school board and city council of Kuna, Idaho uses this kind of an approach (see box on p. 44). This strategy tends to weed out spurious individual opinions, and helps valid 'minority' views gain broader support.

Small-group sessions of this kind are most successful when the participants can set their own ground rules, and confidentiality is one of the most common rules. When elected officials are part of the discussion, this practice may be in conflict with the letter, if not the intent, of open meetings laws. However, it should be possible to hold these conversations in a way that is both workable and legal – perhaps by allowing individual comments to be confidential as long as the small group makes some kind of consensual public report. In any case, local, state, and federal open meeting laws should be re-examined, and in some cases redesigned, so that they support rather than hinder democratic governance.

When officials foresee that an upcoming agenda is likely to generate some controversy, they could recruit proactively for that meeting rather than relying on the standard advance notice procedures. In order to attract a wider array of people, officials should maintain strong coalitions of citizen structures and other community groups that can help them recruit citizens, both by reaching people directly and by lending their credibility to government's call for participation. In some cases, a "third party" like the Chamber of Commerce or League of Women Voters might even be a more credible and legitimate host for such a forum than the government body itself.

By using these tactics for recruitment, deliberation, and coalition-building, elected bodies could add a third criterion, participation, to the traditional standards of openness and efficiency. Rather than having to sit through meetings where the public is either angry or absent, elected officials can enjoy a system that allows them to probe and comprehend how people feel about important issues.

Changing the way that City Hall functions

It may be difficult for public employees to interact more democratically with citizens if the departments and agencies they work in are old-fashioned, command-and-control environments. If civil servants feel that they do not have the freedom to make changes, they will not react well to suggestions made by citizens on the outside. In the private sector, many businesses have adopted management systems that give employees more control over the way they work; over the last fifteen years, many public-sector employers have followed suit. Efforts to engage citizens should go hand-in-hand with changes in the internal workings of City Hall or the school district office.

Some of the most common operational changes to emerge from democratic governance efforts have to do with increasing collaboration between departments, strengthening connections with neighborhoods, and addressing issues of race and diversity. The need for cross-department collaboration became evident in places where newly active neighborhood groups were working on plans that required buy-in from different parts of local government. Officials in San José have even changed the way city finances are organized, moving from traditional departmental budgets to "city service area budgets" that cover offices in different departments. "We found we needed to break down some of the traditional hierarchies and boundaries between departments," says Mark Linder. "Now we try to get teams of people, from different departments, working with residents on a particular issue."

Building Stronger Neighborhoods
San José, California

Description: Several years ago, the City of San José allocated $120 million of redevelopment money into the city's neighborhoods. This created a unique opportunity to organize coalitions of neighborhoods in 19 underserved areas of the city. Staff organizers worked with existing neighborhood leaders, identified and developed new leaders, and in some cases, developed new neighborhood organizations. The funding was the catalyst to get people to the table, but the ultimate goal was strong organizations with capable and confident leaders. Over the past four years, Neighborhood Action Committees (NACs) have developed neighborhood plans with top ten priorities. These plans guide all City resource allocations in these areas.
Number of participants/year: 25/neighborhood, 19 neighborhoods = 475
Population of community: 900,000
Time spent by participants: NAC members spend from 5-15 hours a month.
Staffing/funding: City of San José and San José Redevelopment Agency provide the redevelopment funds, though several of the NACs have successfully applied for Community Development Block Grant funds and for funds from local foundations; city employees provide technical assistance to the NACs.
Sample outcomes: Most public building in these neighborhoods, from sidewalks to community centers, seems to have been heavily influenced by the NACs.
Benefits: There are 95 fully-funded Strong Neighborhood capital projects in the pipeline. Strong and competent leaders are emerging.
Challenges: Funding will be more limited in the future; NACs must diversify their scope and continue to find new leaders.

Public employees also need strong relationships with organized groups of citizens, rather than having to respond to the questions and complaints of disconnected individuals. Connecting with citizen structures like neighborhood councils can give staffers a clearer, more gratifying sense of who their true constituents are. Coalitions that link public employees with neighborhood leaders, like the Decatur Neighborhood Alliance (see box on p. 15), the Hampton (VA) Neighborhood Commission, and Rochester's Priority Council, demonstrate the ability of these groups to help local governments foresee the issues that are emerging in the neighborhoods. Rochester takes this relationship one step further: Mayor Johnson stipulated that "Every allocation of the city's $350 million annual budget must support the NBN plans," and asked the city department heads to ensure that all of their operations followed goals set in the neighborhood planning process.

Building cultural competence, and addressing issues of race and diversity within local government, is another City Hall activity that complements, and in some cases has been inspired by, work in democratic governance. In Seattle, the city's Human Services Department began a grassroots effort called "Undoing Institutional Racism" in 2001. The program aims to create social change through: community advocacy; removing barriers to access and opportunity; examining the organizational, institutional, and personal history of racism; and developing an appreciation for cultural difference.

Reorienting public employees to work more effectively with the public

City employees sometimes have a hard time getting used to the idea of democratic governance. Some of the decisions made by these managers – how trash gets picked up, which potholes get fixed, how policing is organized – are the ones that citizens most want to influence, but the staffers aren't always comfortable having residents looking over their shoulders.

This is not simply a matter of asking public servants to be more approachable and eager to please. It also should not be confused with the common practice of "constituent service," where staffers of elected officials run around replying to hundreds of questions and requests from individual citizens – How do I get a building permit? How can I get assistance for paying my heating bill? Where is City Hall located? Rather than fulfilling requests, public employees need the skills, training, and organizational framework that will change their sense of accountability.

Elected officials don't always anticipate these challenges. The Neighbors Building Neighborhoods planning system in Rochester is now one of the most well-established examples of democratic governance, but it took a while for city staff to understand how they should be working differently. "We directed this thing into the neighborhoods and forgot to bring our employees along," acknowledges former Mayor William Johnson.

Johnson realized the need for more training of city employees. "We retrained and retooled the entire planning stuff," says Tom Argust, who recently retired as the city's director of community development "and asked them to serve as facilitators, enablers, resource people…This was a tough transition for some of them, because they were champing at the bit to do the planning themselves." They also established a series of training workshops called the NBN Institute. The workshop topics, which have changed and proliferated over the years, include things like meeting management, working with volunteers, budgeting, the zoning process, and database design. Both citizens and city staffers take part in the workshops. Rochester public employees began to realize that process was as important as results, and their roles ought to be "community centered" rather than simply "job focused."

Local officials in San José have made similar adjustments to help their staffers operate. More communities are developing training programs like the ones in San José and Rochester, which introduce or sharpen democratic governance skills like coalition-building, recruitment, cultural competence, facilitation, participatory land use planning, and participatory budgeting. In successful projects, residents and public employees often make decisions together in areas of city operations, including code enforcement, signage, public works, historic preservation, crime prevention, parks, and economic development.

RESOURCES

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Washington, DC 20009
202-299-0570
www.americaspeaks.org

Center for Deliberative Democracy
Dept. of Communication
Stanford University
450 Serra Mall, Bldg. 120
Stanford, CA 94305-2050
650-723-2260
cdd.stanford.edu

Conversation Cafés
New Road Map Foundation
P.O. Box 15981
Seattle, WA 98115
206-527-0437
www.conversationcafe.org

Deliberative Democracy Consortium
1050 17th Street, NW
Suite 701
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Information Renaissance
425 Sixth Street, Suite 1880
Pittsburgh, PA 15219
412-471-4636
www.info-ren.org

Information Society Project
Yale Law School
P.O. Box 208215, 127 Wall Street
New Haven, CT 06520-8215
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International City/County Management Association (ICMA)
777 N. Capitol St., NE
Suite 500
Washington, DC 20002-4201
800-745-8780
www.icma.org

League of Women Voters
1730 M Street NW, Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20036-4508
202-429-1965
www.lwv.org

National Charrette Institute
3439 NE Sandy Blvd. #349
Portland, OR 97232
503-233-8486
www.charretteinstitute.org

National Civic League
1445 Market Street, Suite 300
Denver, CO 80202
303-571-4343
www.ncl.org

National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation
PO Box 402
Brattleboro, VT 05302
www.thataway.org

National Issues Forums
Kettering Foundation
800-443-7834
www.nifi.org

National League of Cities
1301 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Suite 550
Washington, DC 20004
202-626-3000
www.nlc.org

NeighborWorks America
1325 G Street, NW, Suite 800
Washington, DC 20005
www.nw.org/training

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Public Agenda
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NLC'S STRENGTHENING LOCAL DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE PROJECT

The National League of Cities has been working in the field of democratic governance for over twenty years, by being in the unique position to employ effective techniques to encourage and enable city officials in dialogue and inquiry around various forms of civic engagement, consensus building, collaboration, and participatory practices. This past year, discussion under the *Strengthening Democratic Local Governance Project* has led to the understanding that over the past several decades, research and practice have evolved in an array of related fields that share a focus on effective democratic participation in public life, especially the structuring of public life to facilitate and support effective participation. .

The purpose of the *Strengthening Democratic Local Governance Project* is to increase municipal officials' awareness of, knowledge about, and access to resources about democratic local governance. The National League of Cities is also working to institutionalize a means to ensure leadership and further development of these topics by and for municipal officials. This work is made possible by funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Examples of past efforts are:

- Created a **Panel on Democratic Governance** as part of the **CityFutures Program**. The purpose of the Panel is to develop tools and other products to help NLC members more effectively, and appropriately, engage the broader public in addressing some of the fundamental policy and budget challenges confronting local communities and their governments.
- Learned more about the fields of democratic governance and current practice in cities. NLC has commissioned brief papers, conducted workshops, and printed materials on for background on current work and as tools for elected officials. The project (in cooperation with other NLC initiatives) has analyzed local deliberation in Rochester, NY, Kalamazoo, MI, and Lakewood, CO.
- Conducted a review of approximately 20 NLC reports from the past decade revealing a variety of projects involving elements of democratic governance. The analysis showed that some of the work addressed participation by citizens in deliberative processes, while other work focused on collaboration among organized "stakeholder" groups.
- Convened a Future of Democratic Local Governance Forum in 2003 in cooperation with the Hewlett Foundation. It brought together local government officials, academics, and civic practitioners from around the country to learn from each other about the current state of democratic local governance, to explore best practices, and to identify gaps in knowledge or skills that were creating barriers for more effective practice at the local level.

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About the National League of Cities

The National League of Cities is the nation's oldest and largest organization devoted to strengthening and promoting cities as centers of opportunity, leadership and governance. NLC is a resource and advocate for more than 1,600 member cities and the 49 state municipal leagues, representing more than 218 million Americans.