



Working Productively with 21st Century Citizens

A Municipal Action Guide

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by Matt Leighninger

THE CHALLENGE

Local officials in all kinds of communities are dealing with major changes in the relationship between citizens and government. Ordinary people seem more capable and more confident, but also more skeptical and even aggressive. Citizens may have less time for public life, but they often bring more knowledge and skills to the table. They feel more entitled to the services and protection

of government, and yet have less faith in public officials. It seems like many citizens are more interested in governing, and less willing to be governed, than ever before. These changes can make local problem-solving and decision-making more difficult; they also can present opportunities for effective community building that will significantly enhance local governance capacity.

STRATEGIES

To deal with citizen demands and to take advantage of citizen capacities, a new wave of citizen involvement efforts has emerged in the last ten years. NLC's CityFutures Panel on Democratic Governance characterizes these efforts as examples of "democratic governance — the art of governing a community in participatory, deliberative, inclusive and collaborative ways."

In scores of communities, local officials have proven their ability to create broad-based, large-scale programs that convene citizens, public officials, and other stakeholders for dialogue, decision-making, and collaboration. The most successful of these democratic governance projects have:

- Recruited 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.
- Involved 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.
- Given the participants in these meetings the opportunity to compare values and experiences and to consider a range of views and policy options.

- Effected 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.

Understanding local issues and policy questions isn't quick or easy, and one attraction of this more intensive and extensive kind of citizen involvement is that it gives people a better learning environment. Recruiting in this more proactive way also helps officials find out where the majority of their constituents — not just the vocal few —

stand on the issues. Some key lessons have emerged from successful local efforts to engage citizens in large scale, longer-term deliberative processes.

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ACTION STEPS

1. Reach out to citizens early in the process.

Recruitment takes time, especially when you are trying to involve people who haven't traditionally been part of the political process. Building these relationships and bringing people to the table may seem too daunting and time-consuming, but on major issues and decisions, it will be well worth the effort: the more people you can involve, the more successful you are likely to be. A large, diverse, "critical mass" of citizens is almost always more powerful, representative, and effective than a small, homogeneous group.

2. Frame issues broadly (don't just sell solutions).

This is one of the key differences between democratic governance and other ways of approaching the public: giving citizens a range of options, rather than trying to sell them on a solution that has already been developed by public officials or other decision-makers. If people think that the key decisions have already been made, or that local officials aren't willing to listen to a range of ideas, they will be far less likely to participate. The most successful projects are ones that

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focus on compelling issues, broadly framed: for example, asking citizens about a number of different transportation options, rather than trying to pitch a light rail system; or helping citizens consider a number of possibilities for balancing the city budget. Give people some basic background information in plain, jargon-free language, and invite them to add their own solutions to the mix.

3. Use several different kinds of meetings.

There is no one-size-fits-all way of involving citizens. Local officials have realized that simply announcing a few public hearings or "town hall" meetings, and hoping that a wide variety of people turn out, is not effective. You need to reach out through different networks to build that diverse critical mass, and you also need different kinds of meetings: one of the most successful strategies is to hold small neighborhood discussions in different parts of the community, followed by large interactive forums that bring together people who live in different areas. You don't necessarily need to have city staff attend each and every gathering; help community groups organize their own sessions, give them a discussion guide that contains background information and policy options, and train some volunteer facilitators who can help with the process.

4. Use online forums and tools. It is important to take advantage of the increasingly sophisticated and accessible online tools for informing and supporting democratic governance. Broadcast emails can be used for recruitment and to keep participants informed about upcoming events, new developments, and project results. A well-designed, regularly updated website can provide a hub for information and involvement. Bulletin boards and blogs allow people to submit comments and questions online. A few projects have even used 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.

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EXAMPLES OF PROGRAMS

Burlington, Vermont (pop. 39,000) Citizens of Burlington are involved in the allocation of funds and other decision-making processes of municipal government through the Neighborhood Planning Assemblies (NPAs). The assemblies help evaluate applications for the use of federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) money. Each NPA is allocated funds and decides what it considers their best use. They also hold candidate forums during municipal elections and communicate local concerns to City Hall. For information, contact Ita Menow, imenow@ci.burlington.vt.us.

Fayetteville, North Carolina (pop. 120,000) Over a five-year period, the Fayetteville Human Relations Commission and Fayetteville United mobilized citizens to address issues of racism and race relations. City manager Roger Stancil helped initiate the project. Small-group sessions were facilitated by citizen volunteers; groups used a booklet published by the Study Circles Resource Center (www.studycircles.org) to structure their discussion and make their recommendations. Through the process, partic-

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Sedona, Arizona (pop. 10,000) Sedona implemented a charrette process that enabled the community to take part in planning for the reconstruction of the portion of state road running through town. Coordinated by the Arizona Department of

Transportation, city staff, and an engineering firm consultant, the charrette responded to public concern about widening the road. The first charrette, involving over 500 participants from the community, created a list of 12 road-related values. The second involved the community finalizing an evaluation program responsible for determining which corridor planning concepts best represent the core values developed in the first charrette. In the third and final charrette, the community drew from the evaluation process of the second to decide which option to choose for the road's final design. About 172 community members chose from a toolbox of turn lanes, crosswalks, bike paths, raised medians, and other transportation design elements, and applied them to a large map of the corridor. Community interviews, focus groups, periodic Friday morning programs, bi-weekly newsletters, an open-to the-public project office, and an exclusive media relations program involved the public in the project as well. For information, contact City Manager Eric Levitt at elevitt@sedonaaz.gov.

Morgan Hill, California (pop. 37,000) The city faced a difficult choice in addressing a looming structural budget deficit: cut essential services (which residents opposed in polls) or raise additional revenues (which they also opposed). City leaders wanted to create a process that would engage more than the usual participants in public meetings and letters to the editor, and help residents move past wishful thinking. They worked with Viewpoint Learning (www.viewpointlearning.org), which designed a

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For more community examples, see NLC's City Practice Resources at www.nlc.org or the Democracy Helpline at www.democracyhelpline.org.

“Meeting in a Box” kit that leaders from Morgan Hill have now used in almost 30 community conversations with citizens hosted by a range of

local organizations, businesses and individuals. These meetings culminated in a capstone event that brought together the mayor and all members of the city council, a wide range of civic leaders, and some of the residents who had participated in the community conversations. Building on the conclusions reached by the public in the community conversations, the capstone session identified a surprising amount of common ground on the best way forward. This common ground is now being used by the city council as one important basis for budget decisions. For example, it is contributing to the development of the city’s Sustainable Budget Strategy that calls for a more aggressive effort to

locate retail sales generators, while restricting staff growth in a community that itself is growing. For information, contact Jack Dilles, Finance Director, at jack.dilles@morganhill.ca.gov.

Juneau, Alaska (pop. 31,000) Juneau involves its citizens in city government through 21 neighborhood associations. Formed in 1996, the associations aid the city in a variety of decisions such as land use, infrastructure, economic and community development, tourism, and other major issues. For example, they assisted the city in redrawing council districts, planning for commercial development in environmentally sensitive areas, and redeveloping the downtown area. The ordinance that brought the associations into existence grants them the legal right to provide members with notice of pending government meetings, hearings, decisions, and other actions of significance to the neighborhood, notify the proper officials of matters affecting the neighborhood, and review and comment on applications for all re-zonings, major developments, plans or other actions that may significantly affect the neighborhood. For information, contact Municipal Clerk Lauri Sicca at city_clerk@ci.juneau.ak.us

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

When planning a democratic governance effort, it is important to research how other communities have addressed situations similar to yours. NLC’s *Changing the Way We Govern: Building Democratic Governance in Your Community* is a comprehensive how-to manual that describes many of these projects and summarizes the lessons learned. It contains guidance for longer, more extensive processes such as described above in this document and also for shorter processes that are more focused on citizen involvement in a particular issue.

It is available online at www.nlc.org under the “Resources for Cities” menu at the “Democratic Governance” page.

Other resources that can also be accessed via the same page on NLC’s website include:

- *The City Practices Briefs*, a set of program descriptions like the ones listed above.

- *State of America’s Cities Survey on Local Democracy* (2007)
- *The Rise of Democratic Governance: How local leaders are reshaping politics for the 21st Century* (2004)

Finally, the Democracy Helpline (www.democracyhelpline.org) is an online resource that can help you find the community examples most relevant to your situation. The Helpline has been developed by the Deliberative Democracy Consortium (www.deliberative-democracy.net), with assistance from NLC and several other national associations that represent and convene local leaders.

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