

How well are neighborhood associations and other grassroots groups serving their neighborhoods?

Key Questions to Ask about How to Engage the Public **QUESTION 4 OF 14**



Most communities have neighborhood associations, homeowner's associations, neighborhood watch groups, block clubs or neighborhood councils. In some neighborhoods, there may also be other groups and organizations – churches and other faith groups, Community Development Corporations, historic preservation associations or community organizing initiatives – led by people who have a similar sense of “ownership” and responsibility to care for their immediate surroundings. These groups vary somewhat in their roles, and how they operate, but in most cities they are viewed as the ‘ground floor’ of democracy – the groups that are closest and most accessible to the goals and concerns of local residents.

These neighborhood groups also vary greatly in their effectiveness. A great many attract only small, relatively homogeneous sets of residents, who do not seem to have either the commitment or the recruitment skills to involve more of their neighbors. Sometimes, the small numbers are also due to the fact that the meetings are not very interesting or interactive. Finally, neighborhood associations vary greatly in their connections with City Hall, and whether the groups are effective in helping citizens, officials, and city employees work together.

Building Neighborhood Leadership

Hickory, North Carolina (pop. 41,400)
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For the past 12 years the City of Hickory has supported “Neighborhood College,” a program that gives residents a comprehensive look at how the city works. A select group of 15-25 citizens is chosen through an application process to attend 10 professionally led sessions about the city's history, public services and engagement opportunities. The program's three goals are to empower, encourage and engage citizens.

Students are required to accumulate 140 credits in order to graduate. Attendance at class sessions is valued at 10 credits each (10 total classes) and attendance at city functions or meetings awards 20 credits per event. The college offers honors recognition for high achievers who complete the program with more than 140 credits. Graduation occurs in conjunction with a Hickory City Council Meeting.

Neighborhood College has a total of 236 alumni; roughly 15% of them are currently involved in local government in some way. Others share their knowledge with neighbors and take other leadership roles in the community.

MORE SPECIFIC QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT NEIGHBORHOOD GROUPS:

- How many neighborhood groups exist in the city?
- Do you have data on the levels of participation in each neighborhood group?
- Is there any formal structure that connects the neighborhood groups to one another?
- Is there any formal or informal understanding about the role of neighborhood groups in local decision-making?
- Do neighborhood groups regularly receive funding from local government or any other source?
- How does city staff interact with neighborhood groups – through a particular department or different departments on a case-by-case basis?
- How effective are the neighborhood groups at recruiting a broad base of residents?
- How often do neighborhood groups meet?
- Are neighborhood meetings run in more traditional ways (Robert's Rules of Order; or a speaker and Q&A), or are they more interactive and inviting?
- Do the neighborhood groups maintain email listservs, use social media or use other online tools to facilitate communication among neighbors?
- Are there block clubs or other groups that operate at a sub-neighborhood level?

POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS:

- Begin gathering data systematically on each neighborhood group.
- Consult *The Promise and Challenge of Neighborhood Democracy*, a joint publication of NLC, Grassroots Grantmakers and the Deliberative Democracy Consortium. (See Appendix)
- Convene leaders of neighborhood associations and other grassroots groups, and talk with them about how they engage their members.
- Work with a civic group, a community foundation, a United Way, or another local partner to assess the state of neighborhood governance in your city.

350 Block Clubs = Sustained Engagement

Cupertino, California (pop. 54,200)
Contact: Cupertino Community Relations Department,
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The City of Cupertino has fostered a system of block clubs that connect neighbors, distribute city information and build community. There are now 350 of these groups, covering one third of the city. "Our goal is 1,000 block clubs," says Mark Linder, director of parks and recreation for the city.

The block clubs mainly use email lists to keep people connected, along with block parties or other face-to-face meetings twice a year. The city provides training for block club leaders, and holds two city-wide meetings for block club leaders per year. About 5% of block club leaders are young people.

Crime prevention and disaster preparedness are two of the main issues that motivate block club members, but people also join for social reasons. Parents of school-age children are particularly active. The city has also used innovative ways to engage block clubs in major public decisions, including a "budgeting board game" that gave people a chance to consider different budget options and led to broad support for the resulting city budget.