

Using your findings to help develop a long-term democratic governance plan

Answering some of the questions posed in this guide can help you gain a greater understanding of your city and your role as an elected official. The knowledge you gain can also be helpful for developing a more sustainable, broadly supported, long-term plan for strengthening democratic governance. The Public Engagement Infrastructure Guide will lay out more specific suggestions for beginning your planning process.

One way to prepare for this shared planning is by asking what kinds of “civic assets” the community possesses. A civic asset could be any kind of resource – a building, an organization, a program – that connects citizens to one another, and to their public institutions, in ways that inspire and support collaboration, deliberation, and shared responsibility. Different cities have different combinations of assets and will likely come up with their own unique recipes for stronger local democracy. Here are some potential assets to consider:

- A city-wide commission to promote, guide and advise public engagement on all issues
- Wired, welcoming physical spaces – schools, libraries, community centers – that can serve as hubs for local democracy
- Mini-grant programs for neighborhood improvement projects, requiring matching contributions of sweat equity, materials and other donations from residents and neighborhood organizations
- Community events that combine socializing and problem-solving
- Neighborhood councils that receive staff support or funding, and have an official role in policymaking and a central role in community-building

One effect of listing your city’s civic assets, and considering the questions in this guide, may be that your picture of democratic governance becomes larger and more complex. How citizens and government interact is only one part of that picture: healthy local democracy requires a variety of supportive organizations, a connected array of local leaders and a range of opportunities for citizens to contribute.

Key Questions to Ask about How to Engage the Public

It is important, therefore, for a number of local leaders to be asking questions and making plans together. City Hall can play a key role in improving and sustaining local democracy, but it cannot bear the whole burden. A strong, healthy local democracy is something that benefits every community member, every organization, and every local leader.

“Sometimes you need a meeting that is also a party,” says Gloria Rubio-Cortés of the National Civic League, “and sometimes you need a party that is also a meeting.”

MORE POTENTIAL CIVIC ASSETS

- Schools
- Business community
- Faith community
- Hospitals
- Libraries
- Community foundations
- Youth groups
- Community centers
- Groups promoting racial equity
- Immigrant service organizations
- Civic groups
- Service clubs
- Neighborhood groups
- Colleges and universities
- Newspapers
- Radio and TV stations
- Public access television
- New online media
- Community organizing groups
- Police and fire departments

