

Introduction

Developing Shared Civic Infrastructure

When it comes to interacting with the public, city leaders often find themselves in a crisis mode. Cities typically face all kinds of immediate challenges, including budget shortfalls, land use controversies, police-community tensions, natural disasters and threats to key public services. Citizens have different expectations, capacities and attitudes about government than their predecessors of a generation ago, and they are less likely to sit still when important decisions are being made.

Faced with the prospect of angry crowds, angry bloggers and declining trust in government, many city leaders have experimented with more productive ways of interacting with the public. These projects are examples of democratic governance, which NLC defines as “the art of governing a community in participatory, inclusive, deliberative and collaborative ways.” Because this work has been driven by immediate pressures, the development of democratic governance can be described with the phrase “necessity is the mother of invention.”

“Developing Shared Civic Infrastructure” lays out a collaborative process for using knowledge about how to engage the public to construct a better framework for public engagement. It helps you design your planning process by assembling an inclusive and diverse group of community partners, arranging for facilitation, sharing the answers to the questions from Key Questions to Ask about How to Engage the Public and addressing some of the common misconceptions about public engagement. The sample meeting agendas found in Appendix 1 can also be helpful in thinking through the planning process. “Developing Shared Civic Infrastructure” also provides discussion fodder for your planning group by describing a number of potential goals for democratic governance.

There are 12 potential building blocks that city leaders and municipal staff should consider as they work toward developing a shared civic infrastructure and fostering stronger local democracy:

Creating Spaces for Citizens

1. Democratic spaces in neighborhoods, schools and other settings
2. Democratic spaces online
3. Democratic spaces for young people
4. Buildings that can house citizen spaces — physical hubs for engagement
5. Engagement leadership

Building Skills and Capacity

6. Public information dissemination
7. Engagement skills training
8. Tracking, measurement and technical assistance to improve engagement

Improving Public Decision-Making and Problem Solving

9. Official public meetings that are more participatory and effective
10. Recurring deliberative processes on key issues and decisions
11. Systems that encourage innovation by citizens
12. Cross-sector problem-solving teams

These building blocks should help structure and stimulate a productive planning discussion. But keep in mind: no one knows your city better than you and the other people who live there. You should feel free to adapt the suggestions in this guide to fit the needs, goals and circumstances of your community.

