BUILDING DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE:
Tools and Structures for Engaging Citizens

A Report from NLC’s CityFutures Program
NLC’s CityFutures Program

The CityFutures Program engages city officials in 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 city governments function.

The Program has three objectives:
(1) to help city officials recognize and understand the emerging challenges their communities face; and
(2) to foster and shape public discussion and policy debate aimed at developing the arrangements needed to meet these challenges.
3) to help shape NLC activities and programs to reflect members’ concerns, interests, and objectives, in the 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’s Advisory Council and distinct 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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November 2005
Acknowledgements

We are pleased to present, “Building Democratic Governance: Tools and Structures for Engaging Citizens”. We hope that it will inspire new ways of understanding how to effectively invite citizens and residents to help forge solutions that add value and improve community outcomes to local governance challenges.

We thank the Democratic Governance Panel that ensures leadership by elected officials on issues of citizen engagement, collaborative governance, and deliberative democracy. Through the panel, NLC provides the means for officials to engage in thoughtful dialogue, articulate their needs and concerns and seek answers to some of the challenges faced by local government to effectively engage citizens in the local decision-making process.

We thank Gwen Wright, Project Coordinator of the Strengthening Local Democratic Governance Project, who developed this report and all those whose reviews, comments and suggestions contributed to the development of this report: Lena Delchad, Matt Leigninger, Chris Hoene, and Bill Barnes. Thanks to Susan Gamble for design and production work leading to the final document.

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Special thanks to the members of the CityFutures Panel on Democratic Governance Panel who provided comments and suggestions and for their commitment to this publication. Current panel members are:

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## Table of Contents

Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 1

The emergence of democratic governance ................................................................. 3
  Challenges and implications of democratic governance

Changing roles for citizens, local officials, and public employees ........ 13
  New expectations and responsibilities for citizens
  The ‘internal shift’ in the mindset of local officials
  Democratic governance and social equality
  Changing assumptions about government and politics

Assessing the state of democracy in your community ....................... 20
  Identifying assets and challenges: an informal survey
  How can people “get involved” in the public life of your community?
  Mapping community networks
  Mapping the local media
  Finding the gaps in your democratic governance strategy

Support strategies democratic governance ................................................. 27
  Getting started: Understanding the different approaches
  Recruiting for numbers and diversity
  Working with the media
Making the most of the Internet
Describing issues: Views, options, and background information
Cultural competence in democratic governance

Temporary democratic governance projects: Goals and formats for
- Engaging citizens ......................................................... 45
- Setting goals and expectations
- Formats for public dialogue, collaboration, and action
- Predicting costs and staffing needs
- Responding to democratic governance efforts initiated outside government
- Supporting action efforts at a number of levels

Permanent democratic governance efforts: Neighborhood councils and other structures ........................................... 63
- Design questions
- Keeping the neighborhood councils running effectively
- Costs of neighborhood council systems: A comparison

Frontiers of democratic governance ........................................ 75
- Changing the way public meetings are run
- Reorienting public employees to work more effectively with the public
- Changing the way that City Hall functions
- New roles for boards and commissions

Resources ............................................................................................................. 81
INTRODUCTION

Many local elected officials have put a new emphasis on mobilizing citizens in order to make decisions, overcome conflicts, and solve critical public problems. This reinforces the perspective that over past decades, research and practice have evolved in an array of related fields that share a focus on democratic participation in public life, participatory governance and especially the structuring of public life to facilitate and support effective citizen engagement.

This resource is the second publication of the *Strengthening Democratic Local Governance* project, which seeks to ensure leadership by local elected officials on issues of democratic governance and civic engagement.

The *Democratic Governance Panel*, whose members provide organizational leadership on this topic, was instrumental in formulating the questions and answers which make this resource an easy page turner. The ultimate purpose of the publication is to provide guidance to the idea and practice of democratic governance, and to develop a new framework for understanding what roles citizens, local officials, and public employees play.

Local elected officials, city staff or anyone working with governance will find this information useful. Neighborhood groups and community organizations will be interested in seeing the nexus between public decision making at the grassroots and authoritative levels. People who are thinking about and researching the topic of democratic governance will find the ideas and examples from real communities helpful.

We hope you will find the guidance, narratives and case studies in this resource useful as you apply it to your own work.

About the Democratic Governance Panel

The purpose of the Panel on Democratic Governance is to support NLC members seeking to improve local democracy by more effectively engaging with citizens in responding to their cities’ challenges opportunities. The Panel seeks to help city officials reengage the broader public, not just as taxpayers and consumers of services, but as full-on partners in addressing the needs of the community.

Over the past two years NLC has carried out the *Strengthening Democratic Local Governance Project*, supported by the Hewlett Foundation. Panel members have identified and discussed themes and questions that help to shape the work of the panel, such as: why should citizens, administrators, and elected officials care about democratic governance; what values underpin the commitment to democratic
governance; and what is the needed relationship between representative and
democratic governance?

The challenges confronting our cities emerge from multiple sources, including:
- Budget crises, arising from declining revenues, increasing costs, and
  increasing demands for services;
- Changing demographics that strain existing service delivery systems and
  challenge long-standing patterns of neighborhoods and community; and
- Eroding trust in government, coupled with historically low rates of voting
  and participation in traditional government processes.

The ultimate outcome envisioned in this work is that NLC will be better prepared to
help local officials strengthen local democratic governance. The collective work of
all NLC’s activities around Democratic Governance will help to achieve outcomes of
gathering and collecting information about strategies and recommended practices for
cities, and building relationships with groups working on democratic governance that
can be of assistance to cities.

We welcome your comments and interest in our panel and invite you to contact us
for more information regarding democratic governance:

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Section 1: The emergence of democratic governance

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. In the process, the concept of “democratic governance” has become clearer and more prominent.

Democratic governance is the art of governing a community in participatory, inclusive, deliberative, collaborative ways. A number of successful principles have emerged from the new wave of democratic governance efforts:

- Tapping into the energy and ideas of citizens and their organizations (including churches, associations, businesses, and nonprofit groups) is critical for addressing many of most pressing public problems.
- Reaching out through a wide array of groups and organizations is critical for mobilizing large numbers of citizens, and many different people.
- Convening face-to-face dialogues can help citizens learn about the issues, empathize with one another, change their own opinions, and build a stronger sense of community.
- Providing opportunities for large-scale, open-minded deliberation allows citizens to consider a range of policy options, resulting in public decisions that are fairer, more informed, and more broadly supported.
- Making progress on issues of race and cultural difference goes hand-in-hand with strengthening local democracy.
- Providing multiple reasons for people to participate will encourage them to stay involved over the long term.

These principles of democratic governance have been pioneered at the local level, led by elected officials and other leaders who are building on their past successes and frustrations with citizen involvement. They have moved beyond town meetings and public hearings, using the lessons they have learned to reach a new level of collaboration and trust between citizens and government.

These local civic experiments are being initiated for very immediate, practical reasons. Cities are encountering budget shortfalls, as officials find it more and more
difficult to convince citizens to support critical public services. Controversies over race and cultural difference threaten to ignite violence. Decisions over land use and the siting of public facilities are increasingly mired in lawsuits and “not in my backyard” arguments. Scandals involving the police, and other conflicts between residents and public employees, have become more common and more destructive. Local leaders have also launched democratic governance efforts in order to address tangible public challenges such as education, racism and race relations, growth and sprawl, youth development, immigration, and economic development.

The principles of democratic governance have emerged in two significant ways so far. Some communities have instituted city-wide neighborhood council systems in order to gather citizen input and strengthen the delivery of public services. Many other communities have organized temporary, ad hoc democratic governance projects, mobilizing citizens to address a single issue, plan, or policy decision. 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.

To complement the neighborhood councils and temporary organizing efforts, leaders are employing a number of support strategies.

- Some cities are using the Internet more extensively as a source of information and a forum for public dialogue that can complement face-to-face meetings.
- Many are providing formal and informal opportunities for citizens to learn the skills and make the connections they need to become facilitative community leaders.
- Others have recognized the need to reorient public employees, and restructure government departments, in order to collaborate more effectively with citizens and community organizations.
The advent of these projects has caused many local leaders to rethink their 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.”

### Changing roles for citizens, local officials, and public employees

Many of the local officials who have been involved in democratic governance work report that it caused them to rethink the reasons they ran for public office. “It isn’t an easy transition to make,” says Burkholder. “You figure you were elected by citizens in order to govern the community – and that if you aren’t effective, citizens will let you know by not re-electing you. The longer you serve, the more you realize that you can be more successful if you involve citizens in ways that go far beyond voting.” Some officials explain their democratic governance efforts by saying they are sharing power with...
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.

citizens, and that it took them some time to become comfortable with this idea. Other officials claim they are merely tapping into the power that citizens and community organizations already possess.

Ensuring the effective governance of the community – rather than simply running the local government – requires different skills and attitudes than the ones traditionally taught in public administration schools (though some of the schools have begun to embrace a democratic governance approach). “You have to be able to frame issues in language that brings people of different perspectives to the same table,” says Roger Stancil, city manager of Fayetteville, North Carolina. “You also have to make it clear to citizens that you aren’t just asking for their input: you want them to contribute their own time and effort to solving problems in their neighborhood and community.”

This change in mindset can be just as difficult and essential 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.

Citizens too are often surprised by the change in their roles. Instead of pressuring public officials, democratic governance projects ask them to talk...
with citizens who have different views from theirs, and find common ground. Instead of merely providing input on policy decisions, they are being asked to help implement those policies in whatever way they can. Many citizens also find that taking part in these activities gives them a new sense of community. “We sometimes forget that people are desperate for social connections,” says Lois Giess, city council president in Rochester, New York. “They make time for things like neighborhood councils because these experiences fill a void in their lives.”

In all this talk about changing roles, 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.

**Challenges and implications of democratic governance**

The rest of this guide is designed to help cities navigate some of the key questions, challenges, and opportunities relating to democratic governance. A number of these questions will come up again and again:

1. **How can officials assess the state of democratic governance in their communities?**

   Many local officials are unsure what citizens think about their government, and would like to gauge more precisely how well their community is functioning. There is a constant temptation to assume that if citizens aren’t participating in public life, it means they are satisfied with government performance and do not see any major challenges facing their city. Some officials claim that this is a dangerous assumption to make – that it takes more than opinion polls and casual conversations to find out what citizens really think. More specifically, officials want to know what issues are
Challenges of Democratic Governance:
What to watch out for

Danger signs:
- 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

2. How are local officials rethinking their accountability to the public?

In cities where there is a particularly strong sense of democratic governance, and a large number of active citizens are involved in dialogue, decision-making, and action, local officials sometimes face a dilemma: how should they balance their responsibility to active citizens with their responsibility to the electorate as a whole? In other words, how much weight should they give the input and recommendations made by active citizens – even if that group is truly large and diverse? This question becomes especially prominent whenever an important and controversial policy decision is on the table.

Local officials with experience in this work usually say that you can't automatically assume that the input you gather from active citizens is the “will of the people.” These officials are serious about retaining their responsibility to have the final say, especially on important city-wide decisions. However, these officials also agree that you must consider public input very carefully, try to decide how representative it is of the whole community, and explain thoroughly your reactions to the recommendations (especially when you have decided not to follow them). Officials have also realized they can avoid some of these situations by helping democratic governance efforts reach a broad range of people, and by ensuring that citizens are offered many different ways of making an impact on the issue – so that policy input is not seen as the only avenue for change. As democratic governance projects become more prominent, these working assumptions are likely to be tested more stringently and more often.

3. How can cities combine the strengths of temporary organizing efforts and ongoing citizen structures?

One emerging challenge is the fact that the two main types of democratic governance efforts have developed largely in isolation from each other. The temporary citizen mobilization efforts – forums, roundtables, study circles, community conversations – are inclusive, democratic, and participatory, but by definition they are not sustained.
The neighborhood councils and other citizen structures give citizens a more ongoing role in decision-making, but they often have difficulty involving large and diverse numbers of people. Over time, neighborhood councils and associations sometimes devolve into small, exclusive clubs of ‘expert citizens,’ who have neither the skills nor the inclination to reach out to their neighbors.

Some local officials are acting on this problem by providing training and support to neighborhood councils, neighborhood associations, and block clubs – showing them why mobilizing citizens is important, and giving them the skills to recruit people and run their meetings in more participatory ways. Others are using temporary organizing efforts to help citizens design their neighborhood council systems, giving them more ownership of the structures from the outset.

4. **How should local officials restructure City Hall, and reorient public employees, to better work with the public?**

In a few communities, successful democratic governance efforts have had a deep impact on the way local government operates. “We had to make our City Hall a ‘flatter,’ less hierarchical organization in order to respond effectively to citizens, and to support their problem-solving efforts,” says Mark Linder, assistant city manager of San José, California. Local governments in places like San José and Rochester, New York, have changed the way they train employees, organize the city budget, develop and review their comprehensive plans, and measure...
government performance. Some communities are also exploring ways to make their public meetings – city council, school board, zoning board – more participatory and less confrontational.

5. **How can officials help citizens avoid being pulled in different directions?**

Local officials aren’t the only leaders who are pushing the idea and practice of democratic governance. Educators are mobilizing citizens to join school councils, participate in district decision-making, and advance parent involvement. Police chiefs are involving citizens in new crime prevention efforts, and organizing dialogues to improve police-community relations. Planners want citizens to help create neighborhood and city land use plans, in order to head off divisive conflicts over new developments. Unfortunately, organizers working in different issue areas tend not to work together, even though the issues are interconnected and citizens might make more progress if they combined their efforts. These organizers continue to hold meetings and create structures that focus citizens' attention solely on one issue. To maximize the effectiveness of these democratic governance efforts, local officials need to develop a language and approach that is more holistic and citizen-centered.

6. **How can officials apply democratic governance on a region-wide basis?**

It is increasingly apparent that many of the challenges facing cities are in fact regional issues, and must be addressed regionally. However, the vast majority of democratic governance projects have been local or neighborhood-level efforts, perhaps because most metropolitan areas lack strong region-wide networks and institutions. In order to meet this challenge, local officials will have to find ways to mobilize citizens across a region, or to help active citizens in each community understand and address the regional aspects of public problems.

**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 is designed to help you learn from 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.
Section 2: 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. One of the things that happens when communities experiment with democratic governance is that, in trying to involve citizens, local leaders acknowledge these changes and begin to adjust public roles accordingly.

When local officials talk about their democratic governance efforts, they tend to list the rational, objective goals of these projects, such as educating the public or gathering input from citizens. However, there are many psychological aspects of this work as well. 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.

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. In addition, questions of race and cultural difference often come up in democratic
governance efforts, even when racism or human relations are not the main topics on the table. 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 them, and value them, in order to succeed.

Because these cultural 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. Citizens tend to stay away from public hearings, school board meetings, city council proceedings, and zoning board meetings, mainly because these encounters usually don’t satisfy the goals people might have for attending them. 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 own leadership skills.
- Deal with conflicts in a civil, candid, and non-confrontational way.

Most of these goals are not fulfilled by traditional public meetings, partly because the main focus of these meetings is the business of the elected body: interacting with citizens is a side function. 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. The more extreme voices tend to dominate, most people don’t get a chance to speak, officials aren’t sure how much weight to give the input they are receiving, citizens don’t engage in meaningful dialogue with one another, and everyone assumes that if any actions are to result from the meeting, it is the sole responsibility of government to implement them. Because officials want to keep citizens from having expectations that can’t be fulfilled (at least by government alone), they often stress that the public resources available are limited. This adds to the general tone of pessimism and discontent.

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

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### 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.
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.

The most successful of these efforts meet the typical expectations of citizens (above) – 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.

### 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. This is a common, unsettling, even scarring experience for local leaders, and it is one of their main motivations for seeking out different ways to involve citizens in policymaking.

In these meetings, some officials get defensive, while others keep their cool. But no matter what they show on the outside, officials often admit privately that they are doing a great deal of soul-searching. 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.**

Collaboration has been a buzzword in public administration for years, but it is only lately that officials have realized that 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. More recently, 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.

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**Four dimensions of change**

As they experiment with democratic governance, citizens and local officials often realize that the changes they tried to make in the past didn’t go deep enough. “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.”

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<th>External</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>• Attitudes</td>
<td>• Skills and competencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Feelings</td>
<td>• Public commitments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sense of purpose</td>
<td>• What people say about a new policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sense of individual identity</td>
<td>- What people think about a new policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Purpose</td>
<td>• Budgets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Values and norms</td>
<td>• Systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Feelings – e.g., of safety and connection</td>
<td>• Structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Alignment of individual and group intentions</td>
<td>• Collaborative agreements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sense of collective identity</td>
<td>- The new policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Whether people agree on the purpose of a new policy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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 of the whole community and marshals the resources of the whole community.

One reason why these tactics continue to emerge is that they tend to produce more informed, supported, and effective public policies. But perhaps an equally important reason is that they make citizens and officials feel respected, validated, and legitimized by one another.

**Democratic governance and social equality**

There is still much to learn about how the advance of democratic governance affects social equality. On one hand, 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 on social equality 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.’ Asking citizens to take a closer look at the challenges facing their communities can convince them, when nothing else can, that public work on behalf of the disadvantaged is something that benefits us all. 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 following chart attempts to summarize these shifts:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Traditional citizen involvement</th>
<th>Democratic governance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who is responsible for solving public problems?</td>
<td>Governments</td>
<td>Whole community – governments, citizens, businesses, community organizations of all kinds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the criteria for “good government?”</td>
<td>Openness and efficiency</td>
<td>Ability to work with the public – identifying priorities, marshalling a variety of resources, achieving tangible changes, and reporting on your progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How should governments recruit citizens?</td>
<td>Public officials call meetings, use media for outreach</td>
<td>Proactive, network-based recruitment by governments and other groups, reaching large numbers and different kinds of people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How should issues be discussed?</td>
<td>Public officials ‘sell’ the policy they support; citizens decide whether to buy</td>
<td>Basic background information provided, range of views laid on the table; chance to connect personal experience to policy debate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How should government treat citizen self-interest?</td>
<td>Citizen self-interest is static; we can’t expect people to change their minds</td>
<td>Citizen interests are malleable, and can be changed through information, exposure to others with different views</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the civic duty of the average citizen?</td>
<td>Stay informed, vote, and obey the law</td>
<td>Become more informed, take part in dialogue, make decisions, take action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When should citizens be involved in public life?</td>
<td>Whenever there is a crisis, a big decision to be made, or some other specific reason</td>
<td>All the time – when there is a range of reasons to participate, people stay involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who governs?</td>
<td>Public officials, in the name of the electorate</td>
<td>Public officials, public employees, community organizations, citizens – all with roles and responsibilities that are distinct but complementary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Section 3: Assessing the state of democracy in your community

Democratic governance is about more than projects and techniques: it is the art of governing a community in participatory, deliberative, collaborative ways. It is a quality that the community possesses, to one degree or another. In most cities, governments and community organizations are doing well on one aspect of democratic governance, but not others.

The methods for evaluating and quantifying government performance have become much more sophisticated in the last ten years, but the technology for measuring citizen involvement still lags behind. This is partly because democratic governance is still a new concept, and partly because it encompasses more than just the activities of government: assessing the state of democracy means evaluating the way that citizens, community groups, businesses, and other organizations contribute to public life.

This section provides a starting point for analyzing the situation in your community. It includes an initial set of questions to stimulate your thinking, as well as sections on citizen networks, the media, and current citizen involvement opportunities.

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 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” in the public life of your community?

In any community, there are probably many different ways to get involved in public life, the political process, and attempts to solve local problems. One way to measure the overall level of engagement would be to count how many people participate in those activities, in a given year, and how much time they spend in each one. This would be a time-consuming and research-intensive process, but it would give you a quantifiable measurement that would allow you to track changes in public engagement over time.

This kind of evaluation effort would also give you a better sense of how broadly supported a group’s policy recommendations might be. The leaders of these groups would be encouraged to include more of their neighbors and peers; they could establish benchmarks for turnout and diversity. 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’ – and so tracking turnout is one key way to gauge whether an organization is being responsive to its constituency.

In the short term, you can also get a good anecdotal sense of the level and quality of public engagement by interviewing leaders who represent some of the groups listed below. Use some questions from the informal survey (above) in your discussion, and to think about what you’ve heard.
Ways to get involved:

- 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 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 for the community or for a particular neighborhood
- Dialogue projects that bring together people of different racial, ethnic, or religious backgrounds
- Adult education opportunities that are explicitly focused on public issues
- Nonprofit boards
- Organizations that serve recent immigrants and help them become politically active

Digging deeper: Are these opportunities meaningful?

Some of the ways for people to get involved are more frustrating than gratifying. For each of the opportunities on this list, 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 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?
- Environmental groups and organizations
- Leadership programs of various kinds
- Advisory boards for the police department or other city agencies

One more statistic 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.

**Mapping community networks**

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, and places where they congregate:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Businesses</th>
<th>Local, county, and state government</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faith congregations</td>
<td>Police stations and substations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth clubs</td>
<td>Firehouses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports teams</td>
<td>Restaurants, cafés, and coffee shops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musical groups</td>
<td>Gyms and studios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fraternities and sororities</td>
<td>Hair salons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior centers</td>
<td>Grocery stores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historic preservation groups</td>
<td>Bars and pubs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libraries</td>
<td>Shelters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universities and community colleges</td>
<td>On-line communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>Recreation centers and community centers</td>
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</table>

**Mapping the local media**

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 three 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.
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.

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.

**Finding the gaps in your democratic governance strategy**

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Opportunities</th>
<th>Well-known?</th>
<th>Well-coordinated?</th>
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Section 4: Support strategies for democratic governance

The principles of democratic governance can be applied in many different ways. You may want to organize a participatory planning or budgeting process. You may want to launch a campaign to mobilize citizens around a critical issue, such as race, crime, education, or economic development. You may want to build a system of neighborhood-level groups which will mobilize citizens on an ongoing basis. All these ways of helping citizens get together, make decisions, and take action can be beneficial.

There are some specific strategies which apply no matter what kind of approach you choose: recruiting citizens; working with the media; using the Internet; describing issues in an unbiased way; and assessing organizers. This section will provide some guidance on each of these tasks.

Getting started: Understanding the different approaches

When you look at the ways that communities have experimented with democratic governance, perhaps the most obvious dividing line among them is that some are temporary projects and others are intended to be more permanent efforts. The temporary projects are usually organized to address a particular issue or decision, or to formulate a plan; they involve large numbers of people in a series of meetings or a one-day event. During the discussions, participants share experiences, analyze a range of views or options, and decide what they think should be done – by government, by community organizations, and by the citizens themselves.

Other cities have tried to establish a more permanent form of democratic governance by creating new systems for decision-making at the neighborhood or ward level. These official citizen committees – with names like “neighborhood councils,” “priority boards,” or “neighborhood action committees” – give residents a say in policies and public services that affect their neighborhood or ward, and sometimes on city-wide decisions as well. The first neighborhood council systems emerged thirty years ago in cities like Dayton and St. Paul; this second generation is much larger and more diverse, including big cities like Los Angeles, Houston, and Seattle, as well as smaller communities like Basalt, Colorado, Roanoke, Virginia, and Santa Rosa, California.

Both temporary and permanent efforts can be effective for reaching many of the goals listed in the previous section. They aren’t mutually exclusive, either: some communities have permanent neighborhood structures, and also launch temporary organizing efforts when an important issue arises. But no matter what kind of civic experiment you are planning, you should ensure that it is inclusive, participatory, and educational. You should aim to involve large numbers of people, in ways that
honor their experiences, allow them to learn more about the issues, and inspire them
to take action.

However, temporary efforts may be more effective for resolving community conflicts,
simply because you can organize them in such a way that people from different
neighborhoods and walks of life come together in face-to-face dialogue. Permanent
structures are usually more effective for reaching the goal of forging relationships
between citizens and public employees, simply because these partnerships take time
to develop and grow.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Temporary or permanent?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ensuring that citizens are informed and connected, and helping them understand their public responsibilities</td>
<td>Either can be effective – depends on how they are organized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolving conflicts and bridging divisions in the community</td>
<td>Temporary efforts usually more effective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involving citizens in important policy decisions, or in the development of a plan</td>
<td>Either can be effective – depends on how they are organized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generating new solutions to community problems, and encouraging citizens and citizen groups to help implement action efforts</td>
<td>Either can be effective – depends on how they are organized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forging working relationships between citizens, public officials, and public employees</td>
<td>Permanent efforts usually more effective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involving new people who haven’t been active in the community before</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing leadership skills and connections for all kinds of people</td>
<td>Either can be effective – depends on how they are organized</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Recruiting for numbers and diversity**

Democratic governance is a large-scale concept: 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, over 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.

**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.

The key to getting this started is to make sure that the effort is not perceived as a ‘city project.’ 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;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why would people want to get involved? (What are their interests?)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>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:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Why would a young person get involved?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Why would a citizen with conservative (or liberal) views participate?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Why would a citizen from a particular racial or ethnic group want to take part?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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.

- 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.

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 prepared to say not only “Here’s why this project will be inclusive and effective,” but “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.”

**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. We often speak of everyone else as “the unaffiliated,” and yet almost everyone in any community is affiliated with some kind of group.

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.

**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.
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 (see section on “Mapping the local media,”).

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;

### 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.
• Make it clear that you expect them to be constructive critics of the project, and of local government’s work on this issue.

Making the most of the Internet

As a technology, the Internet is uniquely conducive to the principles of democratic governance. Websites, email, and other online tools allow citizens and public servants to inform and interact with each other in a convenient, cost-effective way. With relatively little expertise, people anywhere can communicate and disseminate information cheaply, widely, and instantaneously. Some advocates claim we are entering the era of “e-democracy.” However, communities are only beginning to scratch the surface of the Internet’s potential.

Local governments currently conduct a fair amount of ‘e-business’ online (granting various kinds of permits, collecting payments on parking tickets), political candidates and interest groups use mass emailing to gather supporters and donations, and political junkies who are technologically oriented use the on-line chatrooms and weblogs, but online communication has not transformed politics by itself. So far, the Internet has been treated primarily as a time-saving device and a quick source of information.

Ironically, the convenience of Internet use may actually have impeded the growth of e-democracy: when online communication proliferated widely in the 1990s, some observers claimed it would make face-to-face meetings obsolete. Many public officials and Internet advocates saw it as a replacement, not a supplement, for other kinds of interaction. More recently, it has become clear that this is not an all-or-nothing proposition: both online and face-to-face communications have unique strengths, and using them in combination seems to be the most promising approach.

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. The information stays at one address and those who know of it can visit it, but in contrast to an email, it is a passive mode of communication. 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. Another way of making web-sites more interactive is to use “wiki” technology, which allows people to make edits and additions to an online document.

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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Online Tool</th>
<th>Type of Communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide information to people who are already looking for it</td>
<td>Website</td>
<td>One-way, passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide information to people who may or may not be looking for it</td>
<td>Broadcast emails</td>
<td>One-way, proactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruiting people to attend public meetings or take part in democratic governance efforts</td>
<td>Broadcast emails</td>
<td>One-way, proactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
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<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connect citizens with the appropriate city department or office</td>
<td>Website with a directory of email addresses for city departments and staff</td>
<td>Two-way, between individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generate discussion and gather input from the people most affected by a particular issue or decision</td>
<td>Bulletin boards and blogs</td>
<td>Two-way, among small groups of people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actively support face-to-face democratic governance efforts</td>
<td>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 (see box on Rochester).</td>
<td>Two-way, among larger numbers of people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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).

**Building better web-sites**

For the most part, cities have not taken full advantage of the opportunities for outreach and information sharing that the Internet provides. Local governments have not been as innovative as grassroots organizers or the private sector.

Two exceptions are Seattle and Indianapolis. The Seattle website hosts a number of interactive features, including a hot line for city assistance that gives people the chance to ask questions or air concerns. The searchable page allows viewers to get more in-depth information on issues, and tips on how to get involved. Deeper into the site, there is neighborhood-specific information; for instance, you can view crime stats or event calendars for each neighborhood. The site also links to the “Seattle Channel,” where live and stored footage of city council proceedings can be viewed.
The City of Indianapolis homepage has a section for discussion forums (which are essentially bulletin boards that focus on hot topics on the city’s legislative agenda. For example, the discussion forum on the Indianapolis Comprehensive Plan includes postings and presentations from citizens and city staff. The forums allow departments to consult citizens on issues they are facing.

Another feature of the website is a section where citizens can register their email addresses to receive updates on a number of city issues. You can also sign up for the Neighborhood Liaison Newsletter for your neighborhood or township. Finally, the site contains several interactive guides on major issues, such as the public schools,
economic development, and parks and recreation. A page for the Indianapolis Regional Center Plan, the official plan for Downtown Indianapolis, contains comprehensive information on the different phases of the plan, as well as its own discussion forum.

The websites for Seattle and Indianapolis are noteworthy examples because they do more than simply provide information. Both sites provide easy ways for users to stay informed, to interact with public employees, and to reach out to other citizens. Rather than keeping to the first level of the “What the Internet can do” chart, they encourage people to move up to more meaningful ways of getting involved in their communities.

Equity and the Internet

As the Internet becomes a more significant way for citizens to connect with government, it also raises issues of equity. Many people lack either the skills or the wherewithal to access web sites. Cities will have to address this “digital divide” as they improve their websites and other e-democracy tools. Some communities have opened technology centers in low-income neighborhoods; others offer free computer lessons in public libraries and in schools.

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.

Finally, it is important to remember that 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. Online technology may someday be just as effective for some of those functions, but it isn’t there yet.

Describing issues: Views, options, and background information

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.

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
authors 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 accommodate the views of very different constituencies.
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.

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.

Cultural competence in democratic governance

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. 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. The question becomes: “How will the democratic governance effort allow people to address perceptions redressing perceptions of institutional unfairness in resource distribution and decision-making?”
Section 5: Temporary democratic governance projects: Goals and formats for involving citizens

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.

Successful temporary democratic governance efforts share some key principles:

- They attract large numbers, and a wide range of people – they are not merely open to the public, they proactively recruit participants in order to achieve all kinds of diversity: race and ethnicity, age groups, income levels, political affiliations.
- They use a combination of small- and large-group meetings – small groups for learning, dialogue, and deliberation, and large groups to inspire people, amplify common conclusions, and connect participants to action opportunities.
- The small groups are facilitated, and they have a fair degree of autonomy – facilitators are typically volunteers who have been trained to remain impartial during the discussions. They help the groups govern themselves by setting their own ground rules and deciding how they want to manage the time and the materials.
- They allow participants to share their own experiences on the issue, and hear from others why they feel the way they do – people build understanding and trust before they begin talking about more controversial questions.
- They utilize written materials to provide background information and lay out the main views and arguments in a brief, unbiased way.
- There is a shared expectation from the beginning that no single group (such as local government) is solely responsible for implementing the recommendations and action ideas that emerge from the sessions.

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?”

**Formats for public dialogue, collaboration, and action**

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.

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.

Role of handout materials:
- To provide background information.

Possible goals
- Ensuring that citizens are informed and connected;
- 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; and
- Involving new people who haven’t been active in the community before.
- 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.
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 called “Next steps forums.”
- 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 action opportunities (either existing organizations and programs or new committees or task forces) available to participants.

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.

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.

**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, several people – who can serve as the ‘hub’ of the operation. The coordinator should be someone with

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**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. [4]) was designed by the Deliberative Democracy Project.
- The projects in Kuna, ID, Buffalo, NY, and Decatur, GA, (pp. [7, 13, 25]) received free assistance from the Study Circles Resource Center.
- AmericaSpeaks has helped Washington, DC run a series of “Citizen Summits” on budget and planning issues, involving thousands of people.

For more information, see the section on Resources.
“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. It helps if this coordinator is already connected with different networks in the community. 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 may be necessary, not only to manage citizen discussions but 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 previous 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 non-governmental democratic governance efforts**

Efforts to mobilize citizens aren’t always initiated by government. Sometimes community organizations or local activists take the first step, proposing to help the community address a critical issue and asking local officials to endorse, fund, publicize, or otherwise support their initiative.

On one hand, this can be a promising development for local officials who want help in mobilizing citizens. On the other hand, it can put you in an awkward position if the project seems disorganized or inappropriate. Even when the initiative seems well-planned and broadly supported, it can be difficult to decide the best role for local government to play.

In these kinds of situations, it is important to find out more – in a tactful and supportive way – about the goals and capabilities of the people organizing the project. Then you can decide whether it fits some of your goals, how to advise the organizers, and how local government might help make the project successful. You can also decide how visible and vocal you should be as a public official in support of the effort.
Understanding the goals and philosophy of a potential project

Understanding a project’s goals and philosophy can help you explain exactly why you are supporting – or choosing not to support – the effort. The direct approach is usually the best: invite the organizers to have a candid discussion with you about their plans. Make sure that you thank organizers for their work so far, and honor their efforts to improve the community. Though you may not end up playing a strong role in their project, it is important that they see local government as a resource and a potential ally.

Before having such a meeting, it may be helpful to share this guide with the people who will be attending. By describing some of the possible goals and processes, the guide can help establish the context for the conversation and get everyone up to speed. Ask the organizers:

- What are the goals of the project?
- How many people are you trying to involve?
- What kinds of changes are you hoping will result from this project? What is the theory embodied in this project – what is your sense of how we can make progress on these issues?
- How will those changes take place? Who will be responsible for carrying out any action ideas generated by your project?
- Are there examples of programs from other communities that have inspired you?
- Are you using or adapting a model that was developed by another organization? If this group is a national organization, how do they help local organizers use their process?
- What kinds of written materials will you give participants?
- How will you measure the success of the project? How will you monitor any recommendations or action efforts that might emerge from the effort?

It may become clear in the course of this conversation that the project is in fact an advocacy effort, intended to rally citizens around a particular cause or plan. In other words, the organizers have already decided what the community should do, and want citizens to support them. There’s nothing wrong with these kinds of initiatives, but they shouldn’t be confused with democratic governance efforts, which put a variety of views and options on the table and allow citizens decide what they think should be done.

Assessing their capacities: Can they implement the 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? Are the organizers planning to hire an out-of-town consultant as the main coordinator or organizer? If so, 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 institutional 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, usually for a fee. How 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 it 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 national organization supporting a particular process can provide guides, either free or for a fee; other processes require a locally produced guide. Even when the process uses a national generic guide, it will probably 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.** Recruitment efforts that rely on newspapers, television, and radio as the primary method of outreach generally aren’t very effective. 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 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?

**How local officials can help: Different roles for different situations**

Successful democratic governance projects are almost always joint efforts. No matter what group or organization is initiating the campaign, the support of other groups and organizations will be necessary to recruit participants and meet many other challenges.

Local officials have played many different kinds of roles in these projects. These functions can be grouped into several categories of support, depending on the relationship between the project and local government. Here are four kinds of relationships, with corresponding tasks:

**“This project is a public service that government is determined to provide”**. Many successful democratic governance efforts have been initiated and managed by mayor’s offices, police departments, school districts, and human relations commissions. Being able to house and staff the project puts local government in the driver’s seat. Other organizations will be asked to support the effort, but government will bear the ultimate responsibility for how the project works.

**“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.

**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.

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**Action Teams: Steps for Success**

1. Get to know each other better. Try a team-building exercise.

2. Establish group norms. How will decisions get made? Will we use ground rules? How often and when will we meet?

3. Clarify task(s). Prioritize action ideas, with an eye toward “do-ability” and importance. Sort by short-term and long-term. Identify any “easy wins.”

4. Research the task. Who else is working on this task? How have other neighborhoods or groups approached this task? Are there other people who should be in this conversation? What resources (people, access, money, information) do we need to help us? What barriers are out there that we need to address?

5. Develop a plan. Identify all tasks that need to be accomplished. Identify necessary resources. Assign responsibilities and timetable for each task in the plan.

6. Implement the plan – make it happen!

7. Document your efforts. Record your progress as you go.

8. Assess progress. What worked? What didn’t? What could we do differently?

9. Tell the story. Share your successes and challenges with other action groups and the broader community.
• 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, grantwriting, 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.
Section 5: Permanent democratic governance efforts: 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 latched on to an approach that is more permanent and comprehensive than participatory budgeting or community policing. They 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, in order to expedite public decisions and tap into the volunteer efforts of citizens.

Local leaders cite a mix of economic and political reasons as their inspiration 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. The system in Santa Rosa, California, was part of a compromise between people who wanted the city council to be elected according to districts, and those who wanted to stay with the current setup, in which all council members are elected at-large. The Neighborhood Commission in Hampton, Virginia emerged out of controversies related to the city’s comprehensive plan.

From community to community, 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.
Design questions

There are a number of factors to consider when you are designing a neighborhood council system. In each case, the unique political and financial circumstances facing your city may help you decide which option is the best fit.

How to form the citizen structures

The backbone of your system will be the set of neighborhood-level structures that give citizens regularly 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. **Form districts that include multiple neighborhoods.** In some instances, local governments have formed neighborhood councils by carving out new districts, or by using existing ward or city council district boundaries. 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 by forcing neighborhood associations to work together, and by allowing new leaders to emerge. In situations 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.

2. **Empower existing neighborhood associations or other groups.** Some communities already have neighborhood associations, block clubs, homeowner’s 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. However, it 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.

3. **Set criteria for neighborhood councils and let groups 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 each neighborhood submit a proposal – this is similar to the kind of accreditation process universities must go through. In this approach, all of the staff support for the councils is housed at City Hall, rather than at district offices throughout the
The number of neighborhood councils may change from year to year, as new groups are formed and others fall by the wayside. This setup is a compromise between the first two strategies, since it allows greater self-determination by the neighborhoods but requires them to function effectively. However, it can put city staffers in a kind of enforcement role, where they police and reprimand neighborhood councils if they aren’t living up to the criteria.

Some cities have set up two-tiered systems, empowering existing neighborhood groups while also adding a set of districts that encompass multiple neighborhoods. This is a more elaborate compromise between approaches 1 and 2 above.

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. However, relying completely on ‘soft money’ or volunteer labor is risky; most neighborhood councils will become dormant or dysfunctional if they lose their staffing. Maintaining a stable network of neighborhood councils requires that the city and the neighborhood leaders come up with a plan that will ensure some 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. Ken Thomson, a researcher who has been documenting neighborhood councils for twenty years, suggests that the structures work best when each one has at least one staffer, and when they operate in populations of no more than 5,000 residents.
2. **Providing 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. The central office can also produce issue guides or ‘how-to’ organizing information for the councils.

3. **Establishing a training program for neighborhood leaders.** Finally, many communities have leadership programs for neighborhood leaders, operated by the city or by a local nonprofit organization. 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. Some cities have found it beneficial to send some of their public employees through this kind of training along with the citizens.

Some communities support their neighborhood councils with some kind of mix of the three options above.

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### Deploying staff to support neighborhood councils

City employees can provide technical assistance from a central office at City Hall …

C = city employee  
V = neighborhood volunteer
….or they can be assigned to work at neighborhood offices.

C = city employee
V = neighborhood volunteer

How to help the councils make plans and implement them

Most neighborhood councils go through some kind of planning process. In some cases, the group formulates a plan for the growth and maintenance of the organization itself; in others, the planning focuses on the ‘built environment’ of the neighborhood and the kind of improvements that citizens would like to work on.

However, cities make different assumptions about who ‘owns’ such a plan, and who is responsible for implementing it. In some situations, the city already has a certain amount of money for neighborhood improvements, often raised through a bond issue, and local officials ask the neighborhood councils for input on how to spend it. This was the case in San Jose, California, where 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. (Some councils chose to spend this money on their own staffing; others have used it for various neighborhood improvements.)

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.
It may be a mistake, however, to claim or imply that local government bears the primary responsibility for implementing these plans. 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 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. Other organizers are so focused on the future – recruiting participants, planning meetings – that they don’t have the time or energy to report on the past. As a result, citizens may not know what they have accomplished, or get the chance to celebrate those achievements.

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

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**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.
tangible changes in the neighborhood or community. Local and neighborhood leaders need to be able to show how their projects made a difference, and then communicate that message effectively to large numbers of people. 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. [29]) 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. And when people have a chance to report on their own work and register their own views, thereby adding to the data themselves, they are more likely to absorb and use the information they receive.

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. When they are recognized as the legitimate voices of those neighborhoods, they carry a great deal of clout, but they are not the decision-makers. On the other hand, neighborhood councils are sometimes given the decision-making role on certain questions relating to that neighborhood. But the bottom line is that, however their authority is defined, citizens and neighborhood council members need to know what kinds of benefits and responsibilities come with their participation.

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, and the freedom to decide how it should function is an important ingredient for creating that kind of ownership. However, many 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. Councils need a great deal of advice and assistance, but also a great deal of latitude in how to apply it.

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. Often, city employees will not speak up in these situations, afraid that residents will suspect that they are trying to ‘take over’ the neighborhood council. 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:

**Changing the mix of people on the council**

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**

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. 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; it also includes private and nonprofit groups like small business associations, Chambers of Commerce, charities, foundations, community development corporations, etc. 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 – the idea that everyone has public privileges and responsibilities that can’t be taken away. 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 financial costs of different neighborhood council systems, because there are so many variables to consider. Some cities do not differentiate between the funds that go for staffing or supporting the councils and the funds that pay for other kinds of neighborhood improvements; for example, the Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program has a budget of $85 million, but almost all of that money is spent on bricks-and-mortar projects. Some cities can report the budgets for the City Hall staffers who work with the neighborhood groups, but do not keep figures for the neighborhoods because the neighborhoods do their own fundraising. In some communities, all of the funding comes from government, while in others, foundations and other donors share the burden.

The following chart attempts to provide some comparison between different systems:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City and program</th>
<th>Type of system</th>
<th>Budget for staffing/operations</th>
<th>Technical assistance provided by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rochester, NY (pop. 219,000), Neighbors Building Neighborhoods</td>
<td>Ten sectors, each representing multiple neighborhoods; planning is the central function</td>
<td>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 &amp; Seed Initiative (up to $10,000), and the Kodak Foundation (up to $10,000) to implement sector plans.</td>
<td>Bureau of Neighborhood Initiatives – staff of six. Operating/staff funds are $414,000.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>Neighborhood Councils</td>
<td>Budget and Funding Structure</td>
<td>Supporting Departments</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Los Angeles, CA</strong></td>
<td>86 neighborhood</td>
<td>$50,000 annually per</td>
<td>Department of Neighborhood Empowerment – 56 authorized positions; operating budget of $4.3 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(pop. 3,912,200)</td>
<td>councils; they provide input and community impact statements to elected officials, city boards, and commissions on a wide variety of issues, initiatives and legislation</td>
<td>neighborhood council from the city</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Citywide system of neighborhood councils</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Seattle, WA</strong></td>
<td>Thirteen districts, each with a city-paid staffer and each representing multiple neighborhoods; planning is the central function</td>
<td>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</td>
<td>Department of Neighborhoods – staff of 93, budget of $11 million – plus “expert volunteers” with expertise in org’l development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(pop. 563,000) City Neighborhood Council and Department of Neighborhoods</td>
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<td></td>
<td>70 neighborhood groups covering the entire city receive funding for both their staffing and developing and implementing neighborhood action plans</td>
<td>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.</td>
<td>Neighborhood Revitalization Program – staff of 10, budget of $1.5 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Minneapolis, MN</strong></td>
<td>Seven priority boards, each with city-paid staff, and each representing multiple neighborhoods; have input and influence over the city budget. The City Commission has the decision-making power.</td>
<td>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)</td>
<td>Division of Citizen Participation – staff of 4 (aside from those assigned to priority board offices)</td>
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<tr>
<td>(pop. 382,000), Neighborhood Revitalization Program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Dayton, OH</strong></td>
<td>Seven priority boards, each with city-paid staff, and each representing multiple neighborhoods; have input and influence over the city budget. The City Commission has the decision-making power.</td>
<td>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)</td>
<td>Division of Citizen Participation – staff of 4 (aside from those assigned to priority board offices)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(pop. 166,000), priority boards</td>
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Section 7: The frontiers of democratic governance

“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.

There are several of these frontiers in democratic governance: changing the way public meetings are run, reorienting public employees to work with the public, changing the role of boards and commissions, and restructuring City Hall itself. In each of these areas, the work is still new, and limited to a few communities. However, examining what has happened in those places can help us develop a new set of better practices.

Changing the way public meetings operate

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. City councils, school boards, land use commissions, and other public entities function in ways that are increasingly out of step with the larger changes in the citizen-government relationship. 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 acknowledge their need to be heard.

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. [7]). 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 – a routine practice that tends to reach only the most government-focused citizens. 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.

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. This may be particularly true for middle-level managers in City Hall, who often have less exposure to citizens than elected officials, top administrators, or front-line employees. 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.” Residents and public employees now make decisions together in every area of city operations, including code enforcement, signage, public works, historic preservation, crime prevention, parks, and economic development.

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.

**Changing the way that City Hall operates**

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.”

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. [25]), 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.

**New roles for boards and commissions**

One other typical public role is the one played by members of city-appointed boards and commissions, such as human relations or youth commissions. The people who serve on these panels are usually not city staffers, but they are more involved and connected than most ordinary residents. They are therefore in a kind of intermediary position, one which – at least in theory – allows them ready access to both citizen networks and government departments.

Boards and commissions are intended to be representative bodies, bringing the wisdom and concerns of ordinary citizens to bear on public decisions. Unfortunately, many of these groups actually aren’t very representative. Even though the members have been selected on the basis of their credibility in the community, they often don’t
have the time, staff support, or expertise to find out what citizens think about a particular issue or policy.

Democratic governance efforts have helped city commissions to enhance their effectiveness, responsiveness, and diversity. The human rights commissions in Champaign, Illinois, Springfield, Illinois, Springfield, Ohio, Columbus, Ohio, and Fayetteville, North Carolina have mobilized hundreds of citizens to address issues of race and diversity. In so doing, the commissions have built stronger relationships with the grassroots, increased their understanding of how citizens are thinking about these issues, and sparked new projects and initiatives. Before they began working more proactively with the public, most of these commissions were limited to a more reactive role, enforcing the laws on employment discrimination, fair housing, and landlord-tenant relations. Their democratic governance projects have helped them broaden the scope of their work, so that they can do the kind of education and outreach which may prevent community conflicts.

When large numbers of citizens generate action ideas, city boards and commissions often become more vocal and decisive in their support for those solutions. The democratic governance project in Springfield, Ohio, even established a new group called the Race Relations Task Force, as an adjunct of the Human Relations Commission, to amplify the recommendations made by citizens and oversee the implementation of the action ideas. That body played a key role in the changes to the hiring policies for the city police and fire departments. In the long run, these kinds of efforts may give commissions a more prominent place in a city’s system of ‘checks and balances.’

These kinds of projects also lead to changes in the makeup of the commission itself. Because democratic governance efforts provide fertile ground for emerging leaders to gain confidence and make connections, they give local officials a chance to find promising new candidates for appointed offices. There are now twice as many people of color serving on city commissions in Corvallis, Oregon, as the result of a democratic organizing effort involving over 400 people.
Section 8: Resources

Organizations

**AmericaSpeaks**  
1612 U Street, NW, Suite 408  
Washington, DC 20009  
202-299-0570  
[www.americaspeaks.org](http://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](http://cdd.stanford.edu)

**Conversation Cafés**  
New Road Map Foundation  
P.O. Box 15981  
Seattle, WA 98115  
206-527-0437  
[www.conversationcafe.org](http://www.conversationcafe.org)

**Deliberative Democracy Project**  
119 Hendricks Hall  
1209 University of Oregon  
Eugene, OR 97403-1209  
(541) 346-3892  
[eweeks@uoregon.edu](mailto:eweeks@uoregon.edu)

**e-thePeople**  
523 Avenue of the Americas, 3rd Floor  
New York, NY 10011  
646-536-9305  
[www.e-thepeople.org](http://www.e-thepeople.org)

**Harwood Institute**  
4915 St. Elmo Avenue, Suite 402  
Bethesda, MD 20814  
301-656-3669  
[www.theharwoodinstitute.org](http://www.theharwoodinstitute.org)

**Information Renaissance**  
425 Sixth Street, Suite 1880  
Pittsburgh, PA 15219  
412-471-4636  
[www.info-ren.org](http://www.info-ren.org)

**Information Society Project**  
Yale Law School  
P.O. Box 208215, 127 Wall Street  
New Haven, CT 06520-8215  
203-432-4830  
islandia.law.yale.edu/isp/

**International City/County Management Association (ICMA)**  
777 N. Capitol St., NE  
Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20002-4201  
800-745-8780  
[www.icma.org](http://www.icma.org)

**League of Women Voters**  
1730 M Street NW, Suite 1000  
Washington, DC 20036-4508  
202-429-1965  
[www.lwv.org](http://www.lwv.org)

**National Charrette Institute**  
3439 NE Sandy Blvd. #349  
Portland, OR 97232  
503-233-8486  
[www.charretteinstitute.org](http://www.charretteinstitute.org)

**National Civic League**  
1445 Market Street, Suite 300  
Denver, CO 80202  
303-571-4343  
[www.ncl.org](http://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

Preview Forum
Roundtable, Inc.
8 Common Street
Waltham, MA 02451
781-893-3336 x12
previewforum@roundtablemedia.com

Public Agenda
6 East 39th Street, 9th Floor
New York, NY 10016
212-686-6610
www.publicagenda.org

Public Conversations Project
46 Kondazian Street
Watertown, MA 02472
617-923-1216
www.publicconversations.org

Public Forum Institute
2300 M Street NW, Suite 900
Washington, DC 20037
202-467-2774
www.publicforuminstitute.org

Study Circles Resource Center
697A Pomfret Street
Pomfret, CT 06258
860-928-2616
www.studycircles.org

Viewpoint Learning, Inc.
2236 Avenida de la Playa
La Jolla, CA 92037
858-551-2317
www.viewpointlearning.com

Web Lab
853 Broadway, Suite 608
New York, NY 10003
212-353-0080
www.weblab.org
Notes:
NLC’S 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 current “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.