

Local Practices in Public Engagement

Local officials are implementing public engagement processes to mobilize citizens to make decisions, overcome conflicts and solve critical public problems in their communities. Platforms that offer more transparency and collaborations with stakeholders in the community are strengthening governance and leading to open government initiatives.

Residents are being equipped with information and trained in dialogue and discussion techniques to embed citizen input in policy decisions, determine budget priorities and develop citizen leaders to strengthen neighborhood networks. Municipal leaders are employing many techniques to enable citizens to have civil and productive communication. For example, traditional methods, such as town hall meetings, or ad hoc committees with community representatives are used along with the incorporating technology for dialogue and voting in impartial and anonymous ways. Many cities have well-designed and regularly updated websites, online forums and bulletin boards that allow residents to submit comments and questions online. In addition, outreach efforts are designed to engage youth, immigrants and other underserved members of the communities.

The local practices in public engagement offered in this brief present some of the efforts that public officials and their staffs are incorporating in their communities to govern in more participatory, deliberative, inclusive and collaborative ways.

Budget Preparation Using Citizen Input

Brea, California

Population: 38,452

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In Spring 2008, Brea's elected officials were faced with the task of eliminating services in order to balance the budget, so they turned to the community to help set priorities. The city manager asked city staff to volunteer to serve on a Budget Strategic Plan (BSP) committee to discuss community priorities and the city's budget. With a small grant from Common Sense California, the city hired a local public engagement contractor to facilitate a series of community dialogues and surveys with the BSP committee's support. The 40 city staff members who formed the committee recruited 25 residents for the first dialogue to discuss big picture questions about the budget deficit. The second meeting attracted nearly double the number of citizens. Employing the information gathered from these small group discussions, the BSP team prepared the city's Five Year Projection for the City Council.

For the advancement of local government service, Brea was awarded the "Organizational Excellence Award 2010" by the Municipal Management Association of Southern California.

Electronic Platforms for Receiving and Implementing Public Input

Manor, Texas

Population: 3,724

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In October 2009, the City of Manor launched “Manor Labs,” a citizen collaboration platform that allows residents to submit technology ideas for the city and rate the ideas of others. The dedicated website awards “Innobucks points” when someone submits an idea, comments on another's idea or votes for an idea. Once an idea has attracted enough comments and receives approval from a committee, it is then evaluated by city officials, who decide whether to implement the idea. To encourage participation, the Innobucks can be turned in for tangible prizes. For example, 1 million Innobucks wins “Mayor for the Day,” 400,000 points can be redeemed for a ride-along with the police chief and smaller amounts can earn a meal from a local restaurant.

This approach was fueled by a city partnership with Peace Dot, an initiative of Stanford University’s Persuasive Technology Lab. The initiative relies on inexpensive, readily available software tools and has engaged more than a third of the city’s population. Five of the more than 80 ideas submitted have been adopted by the city, including a free, automated guided tour for visitors, who use their cell phones to scan pictographic bar codes posted on historic sites around the city.

In 2010, Manor was conferred the “Visionary Award” by the Center for Digital Government's Best of Texas, and the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University selected Manor Labs for its “Bright Ideas” program.

Strengthening Neighborhood Networks

Portland, Oregon

Population: 566,143

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Portland’s Neighborhood Resource Center coordinates the city’s “neighborhood network,” a system made up of 95 officially recognized, volunteer-run neighborhood associations and seven nonprofit District Coalitions. Since the neighborhood associations were established in the 1970s, they have represented neighborhood interests, facilitated communication and action on local issues and organized community-building events.

The city’s Office of Neighborhood Involvement supports and funds these networks, which receive about \$1.2 million annually. Outreach specialists coordinate efforts with the district coalitions and neighborhood associations, provide technical assistance and train community members in leadership and community organizing skills.

Additionally, the mayor convened Community Connect, a diverse, 18-member volunteer workgroup, to encourage public participation and reinvigorate the partnership between community and government in 2005. Community Connect interviewed or surveyed nearly 1,400 citizens about their vision of civic life. From these conversations, the group created a Five Year Plan with a comprehensive list of recommendations that build on the strengths of the existing neighborhood system. Going forward, several pilot projects are seeking to engage underrepresented communities and encourage civic leadership.



Strategic Planning and Citizen Leadership

Montgomery, Ohio

Population: 10,584

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Information received from Montgomery's Resident Survey 2005 was used to develop goals and implementation steps for the city's Strategic Plan 2006. The city employed three new staff and contract positions to manage the thirteen new community engagement efforts and enhance the three existing processes contained in the plan.

One effort includes the city's ongoing facilitation of dialogues between civic groups, religious organizations and the business community in order to address common challenges. Another is the Community Leadership Forum, an annual city-sponsored event that assembles residents, leaders of civic organizations and local government leaders to share ideas and information.

The city also established the Citizens' Leadership Academy, a 10-session course designed to transform residents into the role of actively engaged citizens, particularly those not normally involved in local government. The course fosters a positive and continuous relationship between academy graduates, city officials and staff, and community leaders. Participants have become a resource from which civic, cultural, philanthropic and other organizations draw their leaders.

In addition, Montgomery was recognized for its effort to communicate in a simple and timely manner by the National Association of Government Webmasters as having the "Best Web Site in the Nation for Cities with Population fewer than 65,000."

Government Transparency in Policy Decisions

Salt Lake City, Utah

Population: 183,102

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In 2008, Salt Lake City took a first step in initiating a culture of transparency and openness; the mayor's new Open Government Initiative established a proactive policy. For about a year, the city sought public outreach, comment and discussion on the scope and needs to be addressed by the policy. During this time, the Open Government Steering Committee recorded baseline assessments and engaged in outreach through a wide range of Web tools, including online forums, surveys, wikis and discussion boards. Meetings were held with the media, business leaders and community advocates. The policy proposed was then placed online and emailed to stakeholders for comment and feedback. In January 2009, the new City Policy on Open Government was adopted by the mayor and City Council. In addition, the mayor now keeps a scheduled open door policy, task forces advise the city on various projects from zoning to gang reduction, public budget workshops have been piloted and municipal websites were redesigned. The public is also invited to attend City Council work sessions and view the Initiative's progress in incremental progress reports posted online. A recent initiative includes an Open City Hall on the city's website where the public can post comments about specific issues.



Performance Indicators in City Agencies

Bellevue, Washington

Population: 126,626

Contact: Rich Siegel, Performance and Outreach Coordinator, (425) 452-7114, Rcsiegel@BellevueWA.gov

Bellevue began using performance measures several years ago to determine how city departments were performing. In 2005, Bellevue was awarded a grant from the National Center for Civic Innovation to create a subset of its performance measures as a communications tool. The city's staff devised 16 "Vital Signs," indicators voted on by citizens that report how well they believe the city is performing. These include service areas — public safety, streets and traffic, financial planning, water infrastructure, parks and recreation — and mood indicators that measure citizen satisfaction.

An outside organization designed a pair of focus groups of 10 people each and a forum to obtain feedback on the Vital Signs. The forum took the form of an "electronic town hall meeting" and held small group discussions, attracting 60 citizens. These two outreach projects obtained feedback and assessed the performance measurement process by citizens who voted anonymously via electronic handset.

This outreach effort is ongoing, and performance goals are continuously set for each year. In 2009, the city met its performance goals in 14 of the 15 Vital Signs where targets were set. In addition, Bellevue conducts a statistically valid annual Performance Measures Survey each year to gather feedback from residents on the city's previous year's performance. The city has also adopted a new outcome-based budget process that examines city operations from the eyes of the community rather than departmental need.

In 2010, the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) awarded Bellevue a Certificate of Excellence for exceeding the performance standards established by the ICMA Center for Performance Measurement.

E-Engagement Technologies

Greensboro, North Carolina

Population: 255,124

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Greensboro's integrated communications infrastructure is advancing new standards for citizen participation and government performance reporting. The city maintains an updated website, Interactive Voice Response and telephone systems, Citizen Relationship/Records Management of 250,000 contacts and integration with more than 20 layers of Geographic Information System (GIS) data, all of which also provide opportunities for citizens to leave feedback. The new WebConnect program allows residents to access their utility usage information and pay bills online. Archives of City Council videos and RSS feeds of city news and road closures are provided. The city also produces and maintains more than 50 online videos and public service announcements for citizens with questions or interests in a given topic. In addition, the city's Contact Center, opened in 2005, provides residents with consolidated telephone access to city information and services.

In June 2010, the Public Technology Institute designated Greensboro as one of eight "Citizen Engaged Communities" for their efforts to provide the public with multi-channel access to services and information.



Neighborhood City Halls

Wichita, Kansas

Population: 372,186

Contact: Megan Buckmaster, Neighborhood Services Supervisor, (316) 268-4351, MBuckmaster@Wichita.gov

The City of Wichita maintains four Neighborhood City Halls spread throughout the city that provide access to various city and social services and to City Council members. Two of these are located in elementary schools to allow working parents increased access to city resources. With limited variation among them, the neighborhood city halls provide free community education classes, computer and printing services, bill pay services and meeting space where neighborhood associations and boards gather. In addition to offering city services, other organizations use the same building space, including a free notary public, police and a health services center.

Mayor's Youth Council & Youth Master Plan

Grand Rapids, Michigan

Population: 193,710

Contact: Lynn Heemstra, Executive Director, Our Community's Children, (616) 456-4353, lheemstr@grcity.us

In 1995, the City Commission adopted a set of youth community standards. The mayor then established a Child Well-Being Task Force to assess how the city might realize those standards. The recommendations led to the establishment of an Office of Children, Youth & Families, made possible through a public-private partnership with the Board of Education and the Frey Foundation. The office, now called Our Community's Children, focuses on youth policy, partnerships and services.

In response to a perceived increase in youth violence in 2005 and a community need for coordination, the mayor tasked Our Community's Children to create a Youth Master Plan. As part of a two-year community-wide process, 25 youth commissioners were paid to help develop the plan. They received training in civic leadership, media relations, project design and neighborhood asset mapping. They also worked with university researchers to survey over 1,550 youth and produced the Grand Rapids Teen Profile in 2009 to integrate youth voice into the planning process.

A 39-member Youth Master Plan Steering Committee was also formed involving city, county and community leaders and grassroots organizers. The Steering committee helped facilitate 13 focus groups, mapped available youth services and created a Dashboard of Outcomes and Indicators to track progress annually. In 2010, Our Community's Children hosted the Ready by 21™ Summit for elected officials, youth representatives and community stakeholders. Together, they published the first edition of the Grand Rapids Youth Master Plan, a big-picture framework that offers a set of community recommendations for future work.

Our Community's Children offers a broad range of youth engagement programs, including the Mayor's Youth Council (MYC), a group of 15 high school students who receive class credit for learning civic knowledge and leadership skills and engaging in policymaking processes during their one-year term. Established in 1999, the MYC publishes an annual report, hosts a regional youth summit and meets monthly with the mayor.

In 2008, Grand Rapids was awarded The MetLife Foundation City-Schools Youth Planning Initiative grant from the National League of Cities and received a Quality Counts! Grant from the Forum for Youth Investment.



Engaging Disconnected Youth

Newark, New Jersey

Population: 278,154

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In January 2008, the City of Newark formed a coalition with Newark public schools, New Jersey Juvenile Justice Commission, and numerous nonprofits and community based organizations to launch the Youth Education and Employment Success Center (YE²S). The center provides access to comprehensive educational and employment programs to disconnected youth ages 16-21 who are out of school, court involved or without parental support. The YE²S Center also seeks to engage disconnected youth into the community by connecting them to resources already available, like Community Youth Mapping. The center carries out additional youth civic engagement activities in partnership with AmeriCorps.

Participating youth also engage in the process of informing their community about needs and potential solutions through activities such as “speak out” sessions arranged with local, state and national entities. In addition, the YE²S Center hosted the U.S. Department of Education’s 2010 National Youth Listening Tour. The Center also helped to coordinate the New Jersey High School Graduation Campaign in partnership with the state’s attorney general’s office and others to seek collaborative solutions to the state’s dropout issue.

As a result of these activities, the National Dropout Prevention Center designated the YE²S Center as a model program and was awarded the 2010 National Leadership Diversity Award by the University Professional and Continuing Education Association. The YE²S Center model will be replicated in the City of Trenton in 2011.

Neighborhood Leadership Institutes

Charlottesville, Virginia

Population: 42,218

Contact: Tierra Howard, Neighborhood Development Services, (434) 970-3182, HowardTi@Charlottesville.org

Since 2006, Charlottesville’s Neighborhood Leadership Institute: Pilot Your City (NLI) program has educated 130 citizens about the tools and resources made available by the city that invite active participation in civic life. Free and open to all residents, the 12-session program is coordinated through the Neighborhood Development Services Department. The curriculum includes a panel discussion with the City Council and presentations on city structure, boards and commissions, planning and development, public safety, the city budget, transportation, local parks, housing, schools, the local economy and green building.

Participants must develop a community project to present to city leaders at their graduation ceremony. For example, the NLI 2009 group made a presentation on the importance of smoke detectors, and as a result, the fire department now provides free smoke detectors to those in need.



Online Forum Community Forum

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Population: 385,378

Contact: Matt Perry, Forum Manager, 612.839.3320, MattP@pobox.com

The Minneapolis Issues Forum provides an online space where more than 1,350 registered participants engage with elected officials and community leaders on civic issues. Initiated with 100 members in 1998, the forum is a grassroots initiative to spark local dialogue. The forum is moderated by a volunteer manager, who adapted the forum's rules and etiquette from a statewide online forum. The forum is hosted by E-Democracy.org, a volunteer-based nonprofit, whose online presence allows it to host more than 30 local Issues Forums in the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand. The founders of the Minneapolis Issues Forum were awarded the Mayor's Award in 2002.

Community Visioning

Eau Claire, Wisconsin

Population: 66,278

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In 2007, an informal meeting of government and nonprofit leaders convened in Eau Claire County, a region with 15 municipal governments. The result was an ad hoc coalition of organizations committed to implementing an inclusive problem-solving approach to community planning. The coalition secured \$40,000 from several sources and contracted with the National Civic League to facilitate the planning process. The subsequent Clear Vision Eau Claire community visioning process combined large community planning meetings with small focused work groups to develop a clear set of community priorities, implementation strategies, and measurable outcomes.

Outside facilitation from local and national organizations was used, including the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, which developed an eight-hour civic training course for about 500 participants called Public Work 101. In small groups, these stakeholders created 125 strategic actions focused on six priority areas: civic engagement, economic development, education, health, quality of life and transportation. These efforts yielded a Clear Vision Plan that was adopted in 2008.

The initial planning coalition continues to meet monthly to maintain connections among key performance area work groups. The coalition recently completed an organizational strategic planning process facilitated by an academic from the local university and are filing paperwork to become a nonprofit. The group plans to convene another visioning process in order to create a Clear Vision Plan 2012.

In addition, the city recently created an online Issues Forum for residents at E-Democracy.org as an avenue to promote communication and is working with the Center for Democracy and Citizenship to conduct training for state and local elected officials.



Study Circles

Portsmouth, New Hampshire

Population: 20,566

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The mayor and City Council decided to use study circles to involve residents in the strategic master plan review process in 2002. To fund the study circles, \$10,000 was allocated by the city and the same amount was raised privately. More than 450 citizens participated in the process, creating a vision statement and many recommendations that were then adopted by the Planning Board.

The organizing team of those initial study circles became known as Portsmouth Listens. This all-volunteer group of citizens partners with the city and schools to discuss critical local issues. At minimal cost, Portsmouth Listens has become a neutral arena for public decision-making on a multitude of issues, including land use, school redistricting, sustainability and political candidate forums. The study circle process begins with small-group discussions of eight-to-15 people that are facilitated by trained volunteers who follow a discussion guide. Each group meets once a week for four weeks and then produces a written report of their findings. Written reports are then published in the local newspaper prior to their presentation to the deciding body.

Portsmouth Listens continues to recruit citizens for community conversations on a regular basis, convening study circles as needed. Currently, Portsmouth is organizing a dialogue about the local budget, partnering with local entities for a regional study circle on wastewater, and using study circles to update its Master Plan.

Portsmouth Listens is a finalist for the Reinhard Mohn Prize 2011 for Vitalizing Democracy through Participation.

About This Publication

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The National League of Cities is the nation's oldest and largest organization devoted to strengthening and promoting cities as centers of opportunity, leadership and governance. NLC is a resource and advocate for more than 1,600 member cities and the 49 state municipal leagues, representing 19,000 cities and towns and more than 218 million Americans.

Through its Center for Research and Innovation, NLC provides research and analysis on key topics and trends important to cities, creative solutions to improve quality of life in communities, inspiration and ideas for local officials to use in tackling tough issues, and opportunities for city leaders to connect with peers, share experiences and learn about innovative approaches in cities.

NLC's Democratic Governance program encourages and enables city officials to engage in dialogue around various forms of civic engagement, consensus building, collaboration and participatory practices.

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