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Rethinking the Systems of Public Engagement

Matt Leighninger

Vice President for Public Engagement, and Director of the Yankelovich Center for Public Judgment, at Public Agenda

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**Rethinking the Systems of Public Engagement
By Matt Leighninger**

Lessons from leading-edge cities

Over the last twenty years, local officials have pioneered many new engagement processes, tools, and techniques. Some of them are highly intensive, deliberative discussions with citizens. Others are fast, convenient, information-rich digital tools; still others are online networks that add technological dexterity to the power of face-to-face relationships.

Many of these innovations are not only satisfying citizens, they also demonstrate the potential of public engagement for helping officials make difficult decisions and solve formidable problems. But so far, these innovations have been pursued primarily on a temporary, ad hoc basis, and have not been incorporated into the way that governments – or citizens – operate on a day-to-day basis. As a result, in most places the system of conventional engagement remains intact.

A number of cities on the “leading edge” of innovation in public engagement have grappled with this challenge. They include Hampton, Virginia, Decatur, Georgia, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, and Fort Collins, Colorado. In these cities, officials are asking: What are the main elements involved in moving from good engagement exercises to better engagement systems?

The dangers of conventional engagement

Much of the innovation in public engagement is driven by people’s frustrations with conventional engagement. Conventional engagement describes most of the meetings or hearings held by public bodies such as school boards, zoning commissions, city councils, and other government entities.

Conventional processes generally rely on a number of common procedures (some of which are mandated by local or state law):

- *Advance notification*, typically by putting an announcement on a bulletin board at City Hall, on a government website, or in the local newspaper.
- *An audience-style room setup*, with decision-makers behind a table (often on a dais) at the front of the room and citizens in chairs laid out in rows.
- *A pre-set agenda* that is strictly followed and that defines the specific topics for discussion. In many cases, issues not on the agenda cannot be raised.
- *Public comment segments*, during which citizens have two to three minutes at an open microphone to address their elected officials. Sometimes, citizens must sign up in advance to speak at such meetings. Other times, they must wait in line for their turn.

While conventional engagement is intended to uphold public values like transparency, accessibility, and accountability, it generally does not succeed. It also seems to have negative consequences for public decision-making and the level of trust between citizens and officials

(Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015). Furthermore, these meetings and procedures are costly, in that they take up a considerable amount of the staff time of city officials and employees (and the volunteer time of the citizens who attend).

But the consequences of conventional engagement go far beyond wasted time and miserable meetings. As the relationship deteriorates between the people and their public institutions, the legitimacy and financial sustainability of governments continue to decline. Many local leaders understand the implications of this shift. They know that the financial pressures facing local governments, school systems, and other public institutions are not just the result of larger economic cycles. “If we think we’re going to come out of the economic tough times we’re having, and expect everything to go back to normal, we’ve got another thing coming,” says Harry Jones, former county executive of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. “We need to reach out and reframe our relationship with citizens – the people who are the ultimate source of our revenues” (Leighninger 2013).

Moving toward stronger systems for engagement

Some local officials have identified practices and principles that are potential elements of municipal engagement systems. Indeed, a more systemic approach to public engagement already seems evident in Hampton, Virginia, Decatur, Georgia, and Fort Collins, Colorado. Pioneering work has been going on in those three cities for many years; as Decatur City Manager Peggy Merriss put it, “It takes time for engagement to become a cultural and organizational value.”

Some of these practices and principles could be considered systemic supports that make better forms of engagement more feasible and effective; others are separate elements that would add their own value to a municipal engagement system. The fundamentals seem to include:

1. Understanding that effective engagement requires a long-term, citizen-centered strategy.

This would seem to be the most basic – almost self-evident – step in planning for stronger public engagement, and yet in most places, engagement is still treated as a temporary, ad hoc solution to a pressing problem. Many officials lament that their cities conduct engagement reactively rather than proactively. Even among the leading-edge cities, engagement is usually a tactical consideration rather than a strategic one.

Jeff Mihelich, assistant city manager for Fort Collins, argues that for a long-term engagement strategy to be effective, citizens need to play a meaningful role in the planning. “Local governments need to be asking people how they want to be engaged,” he said. “Is it a meeting at the park or development site that is being discussed? Is it a Facebook chats with a traffic engineer? You need a robust suite of opportunities for people to engage.”

2. Mapping, creating, and supporting citizen spaces and networks

If assembling citizens is the most difficult task in public engagement, then finding ways to keep them assembled is a key to sustaining engagement. In most cases, the first step is discovering the

networks and ‘spaces’ where citizens may already assemble on a regular basis. In Decatur, this was accomplished through a mapping process: engagement leaders created a physical map of all the organizations, institutions, clubs, schools, and other civic assets they could think of, and then brought that map on an easel to every meeting they held during the planning for the original “Decatur Roundtables” process in 1998. At each of those meetings, they invited people to add to the map by putting in pins for other citizen groups. (In places like Oakland, California, this kind of civic mapping is now being accomplished partly through online tools like the OaklandWiki.)

In addition to discovering citizen spaces that already exist, local governments in some of these leading-edge cities have helped create new spaces where people can help solve problems and make decisions. The “priority boards” in Dayton, Ohio, set up as part of the Model Cities program in the early 1970s, are one of the oldest examples. Hampton established a similar system for neighborhood governance in the 1990s, Cincinnati has neighborhood-based “community councils,” Decatur created a “Decatur Neighborhood Alliance” to facilitate communication and collaboration between different neighborhood groups, and Fort Collins has a new “Connected Communities” program. In these systems, the neighborhood groups receive some combination of:

- funding from the city;
- city staff who are assigned to work with them;
- an official role in development, budgeting, and/or policing decisions relevant to that neighborhood.

A common, longstanding weakness of neighborhood-based systems is that they are established as, or gradually turn into, republican structures rather than truly democratic ones. That is, the people who get involved function primarily as representatives of their peers, voicing opinions and making decisions on behalf of others rather than directly engaging their neighbors in decision-making and problem-solving. To counteract this tendency, Hampton City Manager Mary Bunting emphasizes the need to be clear with leaders of neighborhood groups, city commissions, and other community organizations that they are potential “recruitment allies,” not just “representative voices.”

As part of this approach, the Hampton has “gone where the people are” by facilitating public engagement in the “I Value” program through existing meetings of PTAs, Boy Scout troops, soccer clubs, and YMCAs. “Tacking it on to something they are already doing makes participation easier,” says Bunting. “The power of partner organizations is to get to those hard to reach people.”

Christian Sigman, county administrator in Hamilton County, Ohio, points out the power of new online networks, such as NextDoor (a widely used neighborhood online platform) and Waze (a Google-supported navigation tool that also builds local communities of users). “The Internet is giving us new ways to organize groups and encourage neighborhood energy,” agrees Peggy Merriss.

One of the keys to these online spaces is knowing what they can and can’t accomplish. “We are very intentional about how we use social media,” said Jeff Mihelich. “We don’t use it for conflict

resolution or asking for input on policy development – we mainly use to create trust and push out useful information.”

3. Embracing fun

Some of the more innovative engagement activities defy the stereotype of public participation as serious, difficult, high-stakes work. Decatur holds “budgets and beer” events at downtown bars, “Touch a Truck” opportunities where kids climb on fire trucks and put on firefighter equipment, and “Touch the Budget” events where adults tour public facilities. These activities give people a better sense of how tax revenues are being spent, and they typically include chances for people to vote on their preferred options or otherwise indicate their budget priorities. Several cities have also employed games as a way to engage residents. Garner, North Carolina uses a “Budgetopolis” game developed by the University of North Carolina School of Government.

4. Recognizing the challenges and opportunities presented by race and difference

In public engagement work, questions of race, difference, and immigration status come up frequently. In some cases, cities do not initially – or explicitly – recognize these issues, but realize over time that they are critical factors in engagement. In one all-too-common scenario, people of a particular neighborhood or group do not show up at a public meeting, and city staff take their absence as a sign that these residents “just don’t care about their community.”

To counteract this false assumption, leading-edge cities emphasize the need for proactive, trust-building outreach. Gary Halbert, the city manager for Chula Vista, California, says his city has worked with faith groups to engage citizens. Nikola Pavelic, who works for the City of Dubuque, Iowa, argues that “reflective thinking on one’s own culture, and taking history and context into account, is needed to have honest conversations that build trust with the community.” Cincinnati Assistant City Manager Scott Stiles talks about how Cincinnati has resolved to become “diverse by design.”

5. Building engagement capacity

Taking advantage of the ability to do engagement in many different contexts, and in response to many different needs and goals (of both citizens and governments) seems to require a broader base of engagement skills. Meeting participants gave examples of ways to build the engagement capacity of city staff, citizens, and young people.

Several of these cities have in-house engagement training programs in place for city staff. Harry Jones talks about how the “MeckConnect” program became a vehicle for training and shared ownership for engagement in Mecklenburg County. Fort Collins has established paid neighborhood liaisons as a key engagement role.

In addition, participants in the research exchange described other strategies for building engagement capacity in City Hall. Peggy Merriss argues for the importance of “creating cross departmental teams to work with citizens so that employees are not stepping on each other’s toes.”

Most leading-edge cities also have longstanding training programs for citizens. “Decatur 101 creates ambassadors who know and feel comfortable connecting with city hall,” says Peggy Merriss. Similarly, “Hampton 101 ensures that there are people in each neighborhood who know how to reach citizen hall,” says Mary Bunting. “It has helped produce an ethic that is known locally as the ‘Hampton Way.’” These programs seem to have outgrown one of the main shortcomings of typical citizen’s academies, didactic programs that focus mainly on ‘how government works’ rather than creating stronger relationships between citizens and public employees, or giving people opportunities to help shape how government works. Nikola Pavelic argues that, in fact, citizen’s academies should “begin by acknowledging that citizens’ experience with government has not always been positive.”

Finally, another engagement training opportunity is the Hampton Youth Commission, which for many years has provided meaningful leadership and engagement experiences for students in the city’s high schools.

There are other, more specific tools and practices that could be helpful for more responsive, deliberative engagement systems. Jeff Mihelich describes the need for a strong, clear protocol that would help citizens and city staff determine which form of engagement – from social media to neighborhood meetings to “walkabouts” – was most appropriate in a particular situation or for a particular goal. Annual, large-scale events like the Cincinnati Neighborhood Summit can serve as a regular celebration and focal point of public engagement.

Directions for research and innovation

As cities move forward in their work to strengthen public engagement, there are two ideas that may help to guide their efforts.

First, we should understand and describe that work as a systemic change, not just a set of new activities. That means city managers and other local leaders should be explicit about the need to rethink conventional engagement. (In many cases, this brings up questions of participation law.) Researchers can help local officials grapple with the challenges of systemic change by delving more deeply into the legal and policy questions, by assessing the investments cities are currently making in conventional systems, and by comparing those existing costs to the potential costs and benefits of more participatory, deliberative systems.

Second, we should recognize the roles that citizens can play in rethinking systems for engagement. City Hall can’t bear the whole burden of supporting public engagement, and city employees shouldn’t be the only ones deciding how people want to be engaged. A whole array of other organizations, including nonprofits, businesses, faith communities, and neighborhood groups, should be involved in developing long-term plans for public engagement – and as much as possible, the needs and options in this process should be articulated in ways that citizens can use. This suggests many questions for researchers about how best to engage citizens in planning for engagement.