Clear Vision Eau Claire: Civic Organizing and Local Democratic Practice

BY MICHAEL HUGGINS

Over the past decade, Clear Vision Eau Claire (CVEC) has used a citizen-centered public engagement framework to strengthen the public problem-solving capacity of the west-central Wisconsin community. From its inception, CVEC has drawn on the perspective that strong local democracy and effective public problem-solving are intertwined. Both begin with the conversations citizens have about the common good, and their choices about the kind of community they want. In June 2016, CVEC, operating as a 501c3 nonprofit organization, convened a countywide Poverty Summit for Eau Claire County Wisconsin. The 2-year public engagement effort focused on taking action to address local issues in poverty and income insecurity. The initiative also focused on developing a community change model that could be replicated in other communities and for other issues. This article looks at the civic organizing framework CVEC refined over the past several years, the application of the framework in the Poverty Summit, and the implications for strengthening local democratic practice.

In January 2007, the Eau Claire city manager reached out to the county administrator about county's interest in partnering with the National Civic League (NCL) in a collaborative visioning and strategic planning process to address critical challenges facing the greater Eau Claire community. In March, the two managers convened a meeting of education, business, and nonprofit leaders to hear a NCL proposal for a countywide visioning project centered on active citizen engagement and problem-solving. Quickly securing support and joint funding for the proposal, a collaboration of local government, education, business, and community organizations launched the CVEC process the following June. Facilitated initially by NCL trainers, the initiative drew upon the perspective that effective democracy and local problem-solving begins with deliberative conversations about community and the common good.

Community engagement began in October 2007 with the first of ten community stakeholder meetings held in the community room of a local church. The citizen Initiating Committee invited over 500 community members, with more than 200 attending the kickoff meeting. A core group of 150 participants stayed actively involved through the first year of planning. The diverse mix of stakeholders included members of local nonprofits, environmental activists, students, retirees, business groups, and a limited number of government staff and elected officials. In July 2008, the stakeholder coordinating committee released a community action plan with 125 action strategies centered around key performance priorities in economic development, transportation, education, health, quality of life, and civic engagement. The introduction to the plan document notes that "a central theme of the initiative was that democratic politics begins with conversations citizens have about the common good and the choices they make about the kind of community they want. Using a 'civic organizing' framework, CVEC expanded the community capacity for effective participatory citizenship and collaborative institutional decision-making by government, business, and civil society." Stakeholder work groups were organized around each of the key performance areas. An interim Clear Vision Implementation Committee (CVIC) was established to coordinate the activities of the stakeholder work groups.

In March 2010, the CVIC conducted an internal strategic planning process to assess the effectiveness of the existing interim structures and address implementation issues that had emerged. After nearly a year of active work in the stakeholder meetings, many participants pulled back from implementation work or withdrew altogether. Some action plan

priorities did not reflect the interests of community residents who were drawn to the Clear Vision initiative but had not participated in the original stakeholder process. New priorities and alternative action strategies emerged as work groups tested the original stakeholder action plan proposals with the richness and depth of additional community relationships and detailed knowledge about the community.

The CVIC struggled with what should be done to update and refresh the 2008 plan, and how to do it. Both the efforts of the CVIC and the stakeholder work groups to clarify and implement the plan and move from talk to action proved problematic. The work groups struggled to build the relationships and connections essential to build consensus and make decisions. Stakeholders who came together with energy and enthusiasm to create a shared purpose and vision faltered when faced with the nuts and bolts work of sustaining effective work groups and implementing concrete and measurable outcomes, especially in the context of community governance and power relationships. Volunteer work groups struggled to hold effective meetings and sustain accountable work relationships. Several work groups simply ceased to meet.

The result of the strategic planning process was a decision to move away from the interim structure of the coordinating committee and work groups, incorporate as a 501c3 nonprofit organization, and emphasize a primary focus on civic engagement. The incorporation by-laws clarified that the Clear Vision purpose was to "convene, nurture, and support diverse groups in community problem-solving that engages, members for the greater Eau Claire community in active, meaningful citizen involvement, working for the common good for the future of residents of the City and County of Eau Claire by improving the quality of life, transforming the local economy, and empowering individuals." The vision of the new board was to become "an international model for twenty-first century civic action and local democracy."

The board also adopted an engagement toolkit, prepared by board members serving as in-house trainers and facilitators, to supplement the ongoing Clear Vision training efforts. The toolkit summarized core concepts and skills central to citizen focused public engagement and problem-solving. The toolkit also sketched out the importance of strengthening local democracy through civic engagement, and foundational concepts about public work and democratic public life.

In 2012 and again in 2013 Clear Vision convened community empower summits to refresh its action priorities and to build on what it had learned about community engagement and public problem-solving. The 2012 countywide summit included four, 3-hour stakeholder meetings which moved participants through naming of problems, formation of action teams, and training in core concepts and skills, including preparing action plans and conducting effective meetings. The 2012 summit also included an effort to blend face to face with online engagement technology. Subsequent action teams implemented community initiatives on community gardens, diversity, and bicycle safety. The empowerment summit process was repeated in 2013 with a series of six stakeholder meetings. Citizens formed action teams to address issues related to an AIDS resource center, youth environmental education, youth civic education training, and mental health.

Through early 2014, Clear Vision had convened and trained over 250 community members to address issues in jobs for the underemployed, environmental sustainability, early education preparedness, regional transit, treatment in lieu of incarceration, bicycle pathways and planning, community gardens, public infrastructure spending for swimming pools, and community performing arts facilities. In June, Clear Vision's public engagement approach was cited as one of the three community initiatives leading to Eau Claire's selection as an All-America City. Also in 2014, Clear Vision convened a series of 11 Community Conversations throughout Eau Claire County to provide opportunities for citizens to name their core values, potential threats to their community, and possible citizen strategies. A consistent priority theme named by participants in these conversations was a concern about the impacts of poverty and income insecurity on individuals and families throughout Eau Claire County.

Also in 2014 voters approved separate county and city bond referenda for an $80 million Confluence Arts Center and companion downtown mixed-use development. The mixed use residential and commercial building opened in 2017. The adjoining arts center is scheduled for the first performances in fall 2018.

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In 2015, Harvard University's Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation selected Clear Vision as one of the four national finalists for the Roy and Lila Ash Innovations in Public Engagement in Government Award. The experience of preparing the Ash Award application, and reflecting on what had been learned about public engagement and problem-solving since 2007, prompted the Clear Vision Board to consider launching a major community convening to apply what had been learned, and to refine its relational problem-solving framework.

Civic Organizing

Clear Vision's experiences with public engagement, and especially with citizen action teams, reinforced the usefulness of *civic organizing* as a conceptual framework for citizen engagement and public problem-solving. In this framework, citizen engagement is viewed as those individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern by naming problems, discussing alternatives, making tradeoffs among options, and taking public action. The *civic organizing* framework that emerged from Clear Vision's work with small groups emphasizes (1) relational problem-solving skill training for individuals and work groups; (2) creating safe and accessible public spaces for public work; (3) creating opportunities for exercising joint leadership by ordinary people and institutional leaders working as citizens; and (4) restructuring and expanding existing government and institutional settings and spaces where people do their public work with

more participatory and democratic processes. This *civic organizing* framework draws directly on the Public Achievement model developed by the Center for Democracy and Citizenship in the 1990s and the importance of building the agency of lay citizens to do public work. The framework incorporates both (1) core concepts with reframing language about citizen centered politics and public work; and (2) core relational public problem-solving skills into the individual and group work of citizens as they come to grips with community issues. The application of both concepts and skills is essential for citizens engaged in public problem-solving to build the mutual trust and community connections essential for sustained public action.

To support its engagement work, Clear Vision compiled both a CVEC Toolkit to supplement its citizen training, as well as a separate Coaches Guide to support recruitment and training of action team coaches. Both guides provide a summary of core concepts and skill, as well as an overview of the underlying philosophy of Public Achievement and public work.

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Core civic organizing concepts include:

- **Civic Agency**: The capacities of diverse citizens and groups to work collaboratively to address common challenges, solve problems, and engage in public work
- **Diversity**: In the context of public problem-solving, diversity refers to the different skills, knowledge, and interests of participants as well as their ethnic, racial, religious, and economic backgrounds. Learning to listen to, appreciate, and work with diverse others is essential for effective public problem-solving.
- **Mediating Institutions**: The institutions, organizations, associations, and groups that provide the spaces where people do public work and govern society. Mediating institutions range from service

clubs to unions to business associations, from churches to neighborhoods to schools to government, from the places people volunteer to the places people work.

- **Politics**: From the Greek *politikos*, meaning "the work of citizens" includes the customs, habits, power structures, and the formal and informal rules people use to make decisions where they live and work.
- **Power**: From the Latin *potêre* and Spanish *poder* meaning "to be able" is the capacity to act in and influence the world. The concept of relational power exists in a give-and-take, multi-directional relationship and is derived from many sources: relationships, knowledge, experience, organization, perseverance, moral persuasion, and material resources.
- **Public life**: The roles that people take at work, at schools, and in the community (apart from private and family relationships) where they act on diverse self-interest to solve common problems. The success of public problem-solving and local democracy depends on how everyday people live their public lives
- **Public relationships**: Understanding the distinctions between private and public relationships is essential to building relational power and connections for sustained public action. Private relationships are the relationships we have with our family, spouses and partners, and a few very close friends, and are more permanent, marked by feelings of love, kinship, and the need to be liked. Public relationships are essentially all other relationships, and are formal and contractual, based on quid pro quo, accountability, and the need to be respected.
- **Public work**: The sustained and visible efforts by a mix of people that creates material or cultural things of lasting civic impact, while developing civic learning and capacity in the process. Public work involves the move from seeing citizens as consumers to producers and from deferring to expertise to building broad collaborations that draw on both the technical and broad community knowledge of all citizens.
- **Self-interest**: From the Latin *inter* and *esse* "self among others" is the product of our personal history, motivation, experience, understanding, and reflection about who we are and what we care about most in the context of relationships with

others. Our self- interest cannot be defined for us by others. We can define our own interest only by interacting with others and achieve our interests only by considering the interests of others. Acting from self-interest is why people take action and stay engaged in public life.

Civic organizing also relies on a short list of core individual and group skills to help participants build the mutual trust and community connections essential for sustained public action. These core skills include:

- **Values house meeting**: A 1½ hour structured small group discussion through which diverse participants identify their deeply held values, concerns, and strategies for public action through round robin responses to three general questions:
  - What values and traditions are important to you, and why?
  - What trends and forces might threaten these values?
  - What can we do in our community to address these threats and strengthen our civic life?
- **World As It Is, World As It Should Be**: Using the simple graphic illustrated below, this is a work group exercise to get participants started in identifying and naming issues and problems in their communities, and thinking about the power relationship dynamics that might have contributed to the "world as it is." Naming conditions or characteristics in the "world as it is" also helps surface the core values of participants and the potential tensions among conflicting beliefs. Shifting the discussion to consideration of the "world as it should be" helps spur group creativity in imagining potential public actions to bring about change.

The World As It Is   The World As It Should Be

TENSION
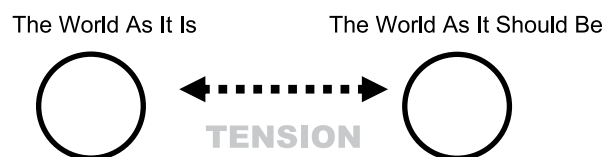
- **5 WHYS**: The 5 WHYS is a root cause analysis technique that helps work groups identify and clarify underlying conditions for issues and problems. By identifying and addressing root causes

work groups improve their capacity to create more sustainable systemic change, and move beyond simply reacting to surface problems. 5 WHYS is simply a process of asking the question "Why?" successively five times or more to get at deeper causes of each answer given, to understand the interrelationships of potential causal factors, and to move to a shared agreement on the nature of the problem being addressed. The process is:
  o "What is the problem?
  o "Why is that happening?
  o "Why is that? (asked at least three more times)

- **One-to-One relational meeting:** A 30- to 40-minute face-to-face meeting scheduled for the purpose of discovering another person's self-interest and the potential for building a public relationship around shared interests in a problem or issue. One-to-ones focus on open-ended "why" and "what" questions to explore another person's interests, passions, stories, and the public issues that energize that person. Archimedes is often quoted as saying "Give me a place to stand and with a lever, I will move the whole." The one-to-one is a lever with which you can move your community, and possibly the world

- **Power mapping:** A simple graphic technique for work groups to organize knowledge and information about power relationships about potential stakeholders, and to illustrate the political and cultural resources that affect and are affected by an issue. Power mapping assists in identifying who has power to influence an issue and to develop deeper understanding of problems and stakeholder interests. Maps are also used to create one-to-one meeting assignments for action team members. Power maps change and evolve to reflect new information and learning about self-interests and stakeholder relationships.

- **Public Evaluation:** A 5- to 10-minute debrief at the end of a meeting to allow participants to evaluate their collective work, assess progress, clarify misunderstandings and tensions, and reflect on the impact of their work on the broader community. Clear Vision incorporates public evaluations into all of its Board and committee meetings, action team meetings, and public convenings. Possible questions may include:

  o "What worked well?"
  o "What could we do better next time?"
  o "What one word describes how you feel about our work today?"

- **Project Charter Statement:** A Project Charter Statement is a concise mission statement prepared by a work group to express how it will address a selected problem. A charter statement serves both as a tool to help hold a team accountable in measuring its work progress and as a public outreach tool in explaining a project and recruiting additional participants. Clear Vision often uses a simple project charter template to help work groups develop their initial statement:

"We, the _____Action Team believe that_____ is a serious problem in the _____community, contributing to _____, _____, and _____.

We propose to _____ _____. We believe that this will help solve the problem by _____. In order to implement this solution, we intend to _____ _____.

- **Action Planning:** An action plan is a written description of a work group's step-by-step strategies, tasks, timelines, responsibilities, and milestones for implementing its project charter. Action Planning begins with a review of the work group's power map and moves on to consideration of alternatives and agreement on measurable objectives and tasks. Recording an action plan and timelines on a flip chart and posting it at each work group meeting also helps keep the work group mindful of accomplishments and what yet needs to be done.

Neither the above concepts nor the skills are unique to Clear Vision, and have been borrowed and adapted from work in Public Achievement, community organizing, and continuous process improvement. What may be a little more unique with Clear Vision is its effort to apply them in a community wide approach as a way of building the civic capacity and efficacy of individuals and work groups, and to do so as a framework for community

change. The Poverty Summit initiative, described in more detail below, was a pilot effort to articulate a community change model by combining a civic organizing framework with the community planning and visioning model of the NCL, as expressed in its Community Visioning and Strategic Planning Handbook.

Democratic Practices

From its outset, Clear Vision has focused on twin concerns of how to improve public problem-solving and how to strengthen the practice of local democracy through the greater involvement of active citizens and the more effective collaboration of government, organizations, and networks. In the *Ecology of Democracy*, David Mathews named six fundamental democratic practices that promote democratic values and build the capacities of citizens to address their own problems[1]:

1. Naming problems to reflect the things people consider valuable;
2. Framing issues for decision-making that not only takes into account what people value but also lays out all the major options for acting fairly and with full recognition of the tension growing out of the advantages and disadvantages of each option;
3. Making decisions deliberatively to move opinions from first impressions to more shared and reflective judgment;
4. Identifying and committing civic resources, assets that often go unrecognized and unused;
5. Organizing civic actions so they complement one another, which makes the whole of people's efforts more than the sum of the parts;
6. Learning as a community all along the way to keep up civic momentum.

These practices are best understood as applied, not in a linear or sequential fashion, but more organically as citizens work through specific issues and decisions in their communities. To these six, perhaps can be added a seventh. In their look at the inherent democratic capacities of local communities, Patrick Scully and Alice Diebel distinguish the additional practice of *building common ground,* which they see as a "necessary bridge between relationship building, making decision, and committing resources."[2] The Clear Vision experience

with convening diverse stakeholders for a variety of community teams, as well as the Poverty Summit, confirmed the usefulness of distinguishing this separate practice of intentional connecting and bridging unconnected people and organizations. For the purpose of this article, this seventh democratic practice has been identified as "***connecting***, or *building relational connections, trust, and common ground among diverse and disconnected people.*"

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Table 1 illustrates how core civic organizing skills used by Clear Vision support the work of individual citizens and citizen work groups to engage in democratic work in local communities. Each relational skill builds the capacities of citizens to engage in one or more of seven democratic practices. All the democratic practices are addressed by at least one of the skills. Improving the ability of citizens to use the civic organizing skills directly improve their ability to engage in the democratic practices.

Eau Claire Poverty Summit 2016–2018

In designing the Poverty Summit engagement process, Clear Vision sought to integrate the strengths of the NCL community visioning framework with the relational public problem-solving practices Clear Vision had developed since the initial community visioning in 2007. The Board was also seeking a topic for the Summit that reflected community concerns, and that was unlikely to be addressed any one local government or community organization working alone. In 2015, the Board identified poverty and income insecurity as the organizing theme for the Summit. The countywide values house meetings held in 2014–2015 strongly identified issues related to poverty as a major citizen concern throughout Eau Claire County. Concerns about living wage jobs, the growing rate of poverty, underemployment, and the related debilitating personal impacts on families with children were also cited as major concerns in a 2015 Eau Claire City Comprehensive

TABLE 1. Civic Organizing Skills for Democratic Work in Local Communities

Democratic Practices / Relational Organizing Skills	NAMING *Naming problems to capture what is most valuable to citizens*	FRAMING *Framing issues to identify all the options and the tensions among them*	CHOOSING *Making sound public choices deliberatively*	CONNECTING *Building relational connections and trust among diverse and disconnected people*	COMMITTING *Identifying and committing resources*	ACTING *Organizing complementary public acting*	LEARNING *Learning as a community*
VALUES HOUSE *Guided small group values discussion*	✓			✓			✓
WORLD AS IT IS *Problem and public action analysis exercise*	✓	✓					
5 WHYS *Technique to clarify root cause of problems*	✓	✓					
ONE TO ONE *Face to face meeting to find another person's self-interest*	✓			✓	✓	✓	
POWER MAPPING *Visual illustration of key power relationships*				✓	✓	✓	✓
PUBLIC EVALUATION *Brief assessment of work group performance*							✓
PROJECT CHARTER *Work group project mission statement*	✓	✓	✓				✓
ACTION PLANNING *Written description of work group's step by step strategies*			✓		✓	✓	✓

Plan. Poverty had also been identified as a significant concern by the Eau Claire Area School District, Eau Claire County, the County Healthy Communities Initiative, and United Way of the Greater Chippewa Valley. At the same time, policy responses were fragmented across the multiple political and institutional boundaries, and no government entity or community organization had indicated a willingness to take political responsibility for convening a public effort to address poverty impacts.

An additional key element of the Summit process was the recruitment of volunteers to serve as action teams coaches during the engagement phase of the Summit. Coaches serve as facilitators and trainers for the action teams as they are organizing and learning the core relational concepts and skills. Based on successful experience in the 2012 and 2013 empowerment summits with student volunteers from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, the Board focused on recruiting coaches from University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Twenty-seven student volunteers were recruited and provided initial training by the end of September.

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Drawing on the NCL community visioning model, Clear Vision proposed three phases for the Summit:

• **Phase 1-Initiating (March–August 2016)**
Complete project budget, secure funding, complete facilities planning, recruit a stakeholder Initiating Committee, complete stakeholder analysis and recruitment strategies. The Initiating Committee completed stakeholder analysis was completed in August 2017, and $37,000 was secured in community funding.

• **Phase 2-Stakeholder Engagement (September 2016–May 2017)**
Recruit community stakeholders, including those directly impacted by poverty, to review key data

and trends, identify a shared vision, frame community issues, organize action teams, and be trained in core relational concepts and skills. Close to 300 community members participated in the eight stakeholder meetings held from October 2016 through April 2017. Participants named core values and identified 303 community issues at the initial work session, and then worked through a series of skill building exercises to name problems, identify priorities, self-organize into nine work teams, and prepare project charter statements and action plans.

• **Phase 3-Implementation (May 2017–December 2018)**
Organize a Summit Coordinating Committee of action team co-chairs and Clear Vision Board members to coordinate the implementation of the team action plans. Provide ongoing leadership training and support for the action team co-chairs. Provide seed funding to jump start action team projects.

Priority Poverty Summit goals included:
1. Compile and make accessible a broad array of poverty and income insecurity data
2. Recruit stakeholders from community agencies, organizations, and service providers directly involved in addressing poverty and income insecurity impacts
3. Recruit those directly impacted by poverty and income insecurity with little or no prior public engagement experience to participate as stakeholders and action team members
4. Train 150 participants in core relational problem-solving concepts and skills
5. Recruit and train 12–15 coaches to support the action teams
6. Create joint public leadership opportunities to connect the broad knowledge and experience of community members with the technical and political expertise of professional staff and officials of local governments and nonprofit organizations
7. Organize six action teams to develop and implement multi-year action plans
8. Document the citizen engagement and problem-solving process and refine a problem-solving framework that can be replicated in other communities.

Initiating Committee

The Clear Vision began the Initiating phase by power mapping the community stakeholder perspectives, organizations, and networks that needed to be included in the Summit engagement process. Individual Board members then conducted one to one meetings with mapped individuals to learn how best to connect diverse stakeholders, especially the directly impacted, to the engagement process. Based on the one to one meetings, the Board recruited a group of representatives from community organizations and networks to serve as the Initiating Committee. During the summer of 2017, the Initiating Committee met three times and remapped key community stakeholder perspectives, identified potential obstacles to engagement, and compiled an initial list of stakeholders to be invited to the Summit. Each meeting concluded with a brief public evaluation. Democratic practices addressed during this phase included:

- *Naming*: naming problems by citizens
- *Framing*: framing issues and options
- *Connecting*: building relational connections and common ground
- *Learning*: learning as a community

Meeting 1: Kickoff and Summit Overview

The Kickoff stakeholder meeting was held October 7, with 187 people attending, 1/3 of whom self-identified in written meeting assessments as income insecure.

Democratic practices emphasized at this meeting included:

- *Naming*: naming problems by citizens
- *Framing*: framing issues and options
- *Connecting*: building relational connections and common ground
- *Learning*: learning as a community

The core elements of the Clear Vision process were outlined:

- Emphasize conceptual/reflective thinking
- Redefine core civic concepts
- Teach civic problem-solving skills
- Create safe public spaces
- Build group process skills
- Develop public leadership
- Build civic agency

Early in the meeting, facilitators worked with participants to establish conversation guidelines. In round table discussion format, participants were asked to share their name and what brought them to the meeting. They were then led through a reflection and sharing process to name the priority issues people were facing about poverty and income insecurity and what were the challenges and obstacles to addressing these issues. Each table was asked to select its top five issues and challenges. Participants were then asked to describe what they would see as significant impacts on poverty and income by 2025. The meeting concluded with participants sharing the response at their table to "what went well for you this evening?"

Meeting 2: Naming Issues and Possibilities

Following Meeting 1, the Summit planning committee compiled the list of 303 issues and challenges and organized them into a preliminary sort of 17 themes. At the second meeting on October 27, democratic practices emphasized included:

- *Naming*: naming problems by citizens
- *Connecting*: building relational connections and common ground
- *Learning*: learning as a community

In the first half of the meeting, participants were asked at their tables to review the list of issues and themes, discuss revisions and additions, and how to name the themes. In a modified conversation café format, participants rotated to different tables and different groups to share their comments. In the second half of the meeting, participants were introduced to the core concepts of self-interest, public relationships, and one to one meetings. Participants were then to pair with a person they did not know, conduct a 15-minute one to one, and then switch roles. The meeting concluded with a public evaluation.

Meeting 3: Choosing Issues and Teams

The third meeting was conducted November 10. Democratic practices addressed at this session included:

- *Naming*: naming problems by citizens
- *Framing*: framing issues and options
- *Choosing*: making decisions deliberatively
- *Learning*: learning as a community

Flip charts with the 17 themes named by participants were posted around the room. The summit co-chairs explained that there were sufficient team coaches and resources to support no more than ten action teams, and that each team needed a minimum of six members. Participants were then asked to vote with their feet and stand by the theme and set of issues that interested them. Nine action teams were identified. Participants were then asked to sit with their action teams while two or three coaches were assigned to each team. Coaches then led teams through a values house meeting to identify the particular values and concerns shared by the team about the set of poverty issues and challenges the team would address. The meeting concluded with both individual team public evaluations, and evaluations about the overall meeting process.

Meeting 4: Skill Training
The fourth stakeholder meeting was held December 1. Beginning with this meeting, training and stakeholder work was conducted in the action team settings. After the initial presentation of concepts and skills, participants moved to breakout rooms where coaches reviewed the content and led teams through practice and implementation. Democratic practices addressed at the fourth meeting included:
- *Framing*: framing issues and options
- *Choosing*: making decisions deliberatively
- *Learning*: learning as a community

Teams continued to practice one to ones, conducted a world as it is exercise, and reviewed a sample checklist for cutting issues for action planning. Teams were also asked to schedule at least one team meeting outside of the Summit stakeholder schedule to begin establishing a team meeting routine, to work on one to ones, and to use the issue checklist to begin narrowing down issues and moving toward selection of possible action projects. Public evaluations were conducted in the individual team setting.

Meeting 5: Skill Training
The fifth stakeholder meeting was January 19. Democratic practices addressed included:
- *Framing*: framing issues and options
- *Choosing*: making decisions deliberatively

- *Committing*: identifying and committing resources
- *Acting*: organizing complementary public actions
- *Learning*: learning as a community

The concept of power as a relational concept was explained, as were perspectives about the various *forms* (faces), *levels*, and *spaces* where power may be claimed or exercised. The forms of power include *visible* (observable decision-making processes), *hidden* (behind the scenes setting of agendas), and *invisible* (indirect shaping of beliefs and expectations about public participation and agency). Power was described as being exercised at local, state, national, and global levels, and being increasingly interconnected. Power may be exercised in *closed spaces* (behind closed doors, and not open to the public), *invited spaces* (where the public is invited for public dialogue and joint work), and in *claimed or created spaces* (citizen created spaces and agendas).

Core skills introduced included the 5 WHYS root cause analysis, project charter statements, and power mapping. Action teams then met separately to conduct a 5 WHYS analysis of one of their priority issues, began drafting project chart statements, and to power map one of their issues. Teams were also asked to schedule at least one separate team meeting prior to the March stakeholder meeting to continue to refine the team charter and action planning. The meeting concluded with a brief team sharing of their core priority issues. Teams conducted public evaluations of their individual meetings.

Meetings 6 and 7: Action Team Planning
The next stakeholder meeting was held February 9 and continued action team planning. Democratic practices addressed included:
- *Framing*: framing issues and options
- *Choosing*: making decisions deliberatively
- *Committing*: identifying and committing resources
- *Acting*: organizing complementary public actions
- *Learning*: learning as a community

The major skill training focus was on action planning. A ten-step process was outlined, beginning with review of the team's power map, moving to selection of goals and objectives, brainstorming possible project tasks. To enhance their implementation success, teams were led through a process of identifying SMART project

objectives: objectives that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound. Public evaluation included an assessment of the overall Summit engagement process and consideration of whether to conclude the stakeholder meetings in March or add an additional month for action teams to complete their charter statements and action plans. Participants decided to add an additional meeting in April and to allocate all of the time for Meeting 7 on March 9 for individual team work on charter statements and finalizing action plans. Democratic practices addressed at Meeting 7 included:

- *Framing*: framing issues and options
- *Choosing*: making decisions deliberatively
- *Committing*: identifying and committing resources
- *Acting*: organizing complementary public actions
- *Learning*: learning as a community

Meeting 8: Celebration and Implementation Launch
The final stakeholder meeting was held April 6. The democratic practices addressed included:

- *Connecting*: building relational connections and common ground
- *Acting*: organizing complementary public actions
- *Learning*: learning as a community

Action teams presented their individual project charter statements, priority issues, and initial action plans to a full room of participants, summit sponsors and funders, and community leaders. The first meeting of the Poverty Summit Coordinating Committee was announced to begin coordinating and supporting the implementation phase of the process. Public evaluation was conducted at individual tables and asked for one word or a short phrase to respond to "what did I learn about the Clear Vision engagement process, myself, and others in the community?"

Conclusion
This article looked at the efforts over the past 10 years of a government convened and citizen led public engagement initiative in a mid-sized Wisconsin community to address wicked community problems and overcome the mutual "democratic trust deficit" that challenges local governments and citizens alike. The initial public engagement techniques and problem-solving strategies evolved as the CVEC initiative grew from the ad hoc interim structure of an experimental collaborative visioning project to a formalized 501c3 nonprofit organization with a focused public narrative about active citizen engagement, public problem-solving, and essential democratic practices. The sharpened organizational focus brought a refinement of a *civic organizing framework* emphasizing core problem-solving concepts and skills, supplemented by citizen toolkits and action-oriented skills training.

A full assessment of the current application of the civic organizing to the 2016–2018 Clear Vision Poverty Summit, currently in the first year of implementation, would be premature. However, several preliminary observations can be drawn from the Clear Vision experience:

1. Many Eau Claire residents are not apathetic about community affairs, but rather see themselves largely as outsiders and observers in the public arena, and their lives as isolated and disconnected from larger community concerns. This disconnect is most evident with individuals and groups directly impacted by income insecurity, racial and cultural prejudice, and access to health care.
2. Many small- and medium-sized communities struggle with finding physical places where citizens can come together in collaborative public problem-solving. In Eau Claire, that means finding a place where 200 people can convene in a large group setting, plus four to five smaller breakout meeting places, with adequate audio/visual facilities, and at a reasonable cost. In Eau Claire, that has meant meeting in large, centrally located churches.
3. Government is not the be-all and end-all of public problem-solving in local communities. However, as illustrated by the Clear Vision experience, local government leaders—and perhaps especially city and county managers—can play a critical role in creating public spaces, convening problem-solving coalitions, initiatives and supporting citizen led initiatives. All of which, in turn, expand the opportunities for local government to collaborate and innovate new community solutions.
4. Clear Vision's hybrid blend of the NCL overarching community visioning model with civic organizing concepts and skills is a powerful

combination that can be replicated and extended in other communities, and at minimal cost and investment. While more work needs to be done, this approach seems to offer a framework that can be adapted to other issues and to the unique civic networks, institutional patterns, and public engagement histories of other communities.

5. The civic organizing strategy used by Clear Vision does not replace the formal planning, decision-making, and budgeting processes of local government and community institutions, but rather expands the overall community governance capacity to address persistent, fractious community issues. Integrating the place-based community knowledge and history of lay citizens with the technical expertise of government and community institutions may be a key strategy in building the political will necessary for sustained public action in local communities.

6. The civic organizing approach also does not replace the need for professionally trained and experienced facilitators to lead community deliberation and conflict resolution initiatives for highly polarized and contentious issues. Civic organizing does strengthen the individual and group civic agency skills of citizens and professionals alike to deliberate more effectively and to implement subsequent deliberative choices in the community.

In an assessment of the Clear Vision engagement process published in 2012, the author observed that, "Effective civic action depends on ordinary people thinking of themselves as productive people who can build things and do things; people who come up with ideas and resources; and people who are bold and people who are accountable." And that "long-term success in bringing about citizen-centered community change may be less about the initial priorities and action plans and more about equipping community members to work collaboratively on their own issues of interest."[3]

In local communities, the question as always remains *what can we do* to bring this about. A civic organizing framework offers a way forward for either individuals or community organizations as initiating actors for community change. Perhaps just as significantly, a civic organizing approach speaks directly to the ethical and pragmatic responsibility of public managers in renewing a twenty-first century vision for local democracy that brings people together to take action on wicked problems, is compelling to the citizens themselves, and is built around the day-to-day interests, concerns, and talents of everyday, ordinary people.

Notes

1. D. Mathews. *The Ecology of Democracy* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2014), pp. 119–120.

2. P. L. Scully and A. Diebel. 2015. "The Essential and Inherent Democratic Capacities of Communities," *Community Development* 46(3):220.

3. M. Huggins. 2012. "Community Visioning and Engagement: Refreshing and Sustaining Implementation," *National Civic Review* 101(3):10.

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