CITY OF BOULDER
CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE SCAN
and
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING PUBLIC MEETINGS AND ENGAGEMENT IN THE CITY

2024

Contents

Executive Summary

Over the last few months, the Center for Democracy Innovation at the National Civic League has been working to help Boulder leaders take stock of the local civic context and consider options for improving public meetings, and public engagement generally, in the city.

To accomplish these goals, we have conducted a **Civic Infrastructure Scan** to explore the recent history of engagement, assets and capacities present in the community, demographic shifts, and the state of democracy in civic associations and digital networks. We also fielded a local version of the Center's **Civic Engagement Scorecard** to provide an ongoing source of data on resident attitudes toward meetings and the community generally. Finally, we are providing a **set of recommendations** on strategies and tools to use before, during, and after official public meetings.

From the Scan, Scorecard, and other conversations with Boulder officials and staff, four themes emerged:
- Being Heard and Transparency in Decision-Making
- Interactions with Elected Officials at Council Meetings and Public Comment
- Equity and Engagement
- Boards, Working Groups, and Sub-Committees

In brief, our recommendations include:

1. Replacing the open public comment segment at council meetings with an open deliberative process, and rotate council meetings among different locations in Boulder
2. Upgrading the city's digital engagement capacity in one or both of two ways:

   - Use a texting-enabled engagement process to encourage, facilitate, and aggregate small-group deliberation before, during, and after council meetings AND/OR
   - Change the way the city does surveys: avoid 'survey fatigue' and create a more continuous, flexible, trust-building public opinion capacity by creating a large, standing survey panel

3. Establishing engagement opportunities that inform and are informed by the annual council retreat, including more intensive efforts such as a Citizen's Assembly on a particularly critical priority
4. Upgrading the community infrastructure for engagement by creating supports for productive dialogue on timely issues in a range of settings
5. Upgrading the skills for engagement by training council members and other Boulder engagement leaders to use those supports

Introduction

In many places, official public meetings are fraught with frustration, conflict, and mistrust. By "official public meetings," we mean meetings that are open to the public, where elected or appointed officials are present, and where policy decisions are being made. The legal structure and operational design of these meetings is largely a vestige of decades past and have not really changed over time. Often, the main opportunity for the public to participate is limited to 'public comment/call to the public' in front of a microphone. This often ends up being a contentious and cathartic, rather than collaborative and deliberative, exercise between elected officials and the public.

Some of the enduring challenges that official public meetings experience include poor or limited attendance, polarized atmospheres that consist of division between members of a community and between members of the public and official staff. The mixture of limited attendance and volatile public settings impacts the quality of discourse and safety for those present in the room, and this tends to trickle into the community more broadly.

There is evidence to suggest that bad public meetings are damaging because they:

- Lower public trust and confidence in government, making it harder to implement policies and maintain financial stability.
- Increase frustration and stress for public officials and staff.
- Lead to delays and erratic decision-making, which further erodes trust and wastes public funds.
- Worsen inequities because meeting participants are not representative of the communities most affected by policies.

However, a wealth of practical work in the field of democracy innovation suggests that petter public meetings are possible, sustainable, and measurable:

- There are proven tools and practices that can ensure civil, productive dialogue among people who have different backgrounds and interests.
- These practices can be adopted as part of official public meetings, in full accordance with open meetings laws.
- Before and after public meetings, supplementary tools and practices can reach broader audiences: providing information, gathering input, and reporting on decisions.
- Public satisfaction with public meetings, and the state of local democracy generally, can be measured through digital tools.

There is no one size fits all solution to how communities can make their meetings more inclined to civil productive dialogue because each community is different based on historical relationships, political dynamics, and legally binding requirements. However, we do feel that there are ways to make the atmosphere of official meetings both supportive of the public and the work that government or public sector staff need to do.

Understanding the local context is critical. Local leaders should take stock of the history, social capital, and civic assets of their communities to strengthen meetings and the relationship between government

and citizens. The Center for Democracy Innovation at the National Civic League has developed a 'Democracy Innovations for Better Public Meetings project' supported by the AAA-ICRD Foundation. This effort also benefits from a community of practice made up of civic engagement experts from a diverse set of cities and counties across the United States:

- International City/County Management Association,
- National League of Cities
- Bloomberg Center for Public Innovation
- Participedia
- Kettering Foundation
- Cities Fortifying Democracy
- Democracy Cities

We are working with three pilot communities to advance collaborative, best practices in official public meetings:

- The City Council of Boulder, Colorado
- The Fayetteville Next Commission and Community Police Advisory Board in Fayetteville, North Carolina
- The Mesa Public Schools Governing Board in Mesa, Arizona

In this work we are building on best practices in the democratic innovation field and drawing upon local democratic assets and actors, such as city officials (elected/appointed), non-profit organizations and networks, government departments and their staff, anchor institutions (libraries, universities etc.), neighbourhood groups, and engaged residents. By creating a localized strategy catered to context specific situations, those convening official public meetings will work with us to design an inclusive and collaborative formal process with the public.

What's in this document? This document contains five sections: our research methodology, community highlights (various types of local civic/social capital and any challenges the community faces), council meeting themes based largely on our interviews and some issue tracking, an overview of the results of the Civic Engagement Scorecard, and lastly, our Center for Democracy Innovation's recommendations for better public meetings in Boulder. We have included several appendices, including our interview questions, the full set of answers to the Scorecard, interviewee recommendations for short and long-term changes, and some of the references we used in this document.

Methodology

The Boulder Civic Infrastructure Scan is community-engaged research report about the state of local democracy and community connections in Boulder. The information we present *is not meant to be an exhaustive examination of local civic engagement and connections, and it is not an academic study.* This report is a form of 'strategic research' meant to provide *a snapshot* of some important elements of civic life in Boulder, including challenges and opportunities for improving the quality of experiences in City Council, and the community more broadly.

Democracy Innovations for Better Public Meetings project
Process and timeline

CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE SCAN	COLLABORATE	DISCUSS IDEAS	INTEGRATE INNOVATIONS
• Interview community organizations and government staff. • Launch a scorecard to rate public meetings.	Share the findings with the community and hold a visioning exercise.	Work with civic engagement practitioners, city managers, staff and elected officials to discuss prospects for better public meetings.	Continue monitoring approaches and tools that uniquely address the community's needs.

The research was conducted over the course of 6 months (summer to winter 2023). The project consists of qualitative interviews with local stakeholders (see Appendix B and C) and a quantitative scorecard (see Appendix A) of resident experiences during City Council meetings. The scorecard is available in English, Spanish and Nepali. The opportunity for the public to rate their experience of city council meetings was offered by the chair, and registered attendees were sent a follow up email to fill out the scorecard. Below is an outline of our research approach:

- 15 semi-structured interviews with Boulder City Staff, Community Organizations/Residents, Local Media, and Academia. The demographics of interviewees are: 8 caucasians, 5 people of color, 9 women.
- Desk research (open meeting laws, rules of procedure, city charter, Tipton Report, Building Bridges, Boards and Commissions report, issue tracking)
- Civic engagement quantitative scorecard at City Council meetings: 50 responses (as of 12/21/2023), with 37 completed and 13 partially completed responses.

Community Highlights

In Boulder, there are vibrant community networks and partnerships that positively impact local democracy and social capital within the community. While Boulder is a heavily Caucasian and highly educated population, it is also known for being a commuter city, with a strong student presence as well as a strong and growing Latina/o communities.

There is a strong mixture of hyperlocal and city-wide participation. This consists of multiple *neighborhood* organizations (some of which are HOAs) that are informally defined by residents with varied levels of organization. Some of these groups are very organized and others are less active, and many are simply a reference to an area of the city. Because of the University's presence, the University Hill neighborhood is likely one of the most active and engaged neighborhood groups, with a focus that includes land use, housing occupancy, licensing and permits, and public safety near and surrounding academic and residential communities.

There is also a host of *community-wide* advocacy organizations (many of which are focused on city business and meetings), including the Boulder Chamber of Commerce, PLAN Boulder, Open Boulder, Better Boulder, Boulder Progressives, Boulder Tomorrow. Lastly, there is an active student body with diverse student organizations and groups that are actively involved in campus affairs.

Boulder also contains a variety of city as well as non-profit civil society organizations, partnerships and connections that strive to enhance the quality of civic life through various types of programming and service delivery. Some of the relevant programs that are heavily involved in local democracy and community capacity building include: the Community Connectors Program, Luna Cultura, Local news outlets, the Latinx Parents Advisory Council, Museum of Boulder Voces Vivas, BLDG 61: Boulder Library Makerspace, the City of Boulder Engagement Subcommittee, and The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Boulder chapter, to name a few.

While we note the strong efforts by the community to create and maintain networks of civic engagement, there are still voices that are less actively involved and heard from less than more actively engaged residents. These groups are the Latino communities, the commuting daytime population of people who don't live in Boulder (not only service workers, but also professionals, teachers, University students, etc. (those that commute in 5-days a week, but don't live in Boulder), newer residents, and seniors that have various accessibility issues.

When it comes to engaging with the city there is a tendency for there to be a core set of dedicated participants, that are by and large the same people. Groups that often do participate are focused on specific issues, like arts, bike safety, local libraries, land use and development, housing, and homelessness. Several of these issues align with City Boards and the participants often tend to be older adults, that are more connected, property owners.

There are some notable past experiences with community and public engagement. This includes the [Council Subcommittee on Engagement and a Welcoming Council Environment](#), an Elections working group, and a Subcommunity plan for East Boulder to redevelop an industrial area that involved site visits. There has also been experimentation with a bilingual Planning Board meeting largely through the Community Connectors and Spanish community having live translation, Police pilot supervision, and the [Community Connectors](#) program to work with under-represented populations in conjunction with City Council participation.

In terms of the way and manner that the public tend to engage both in-person and digitally, there are a few notable patterns. *Neighbor*hood groups have an email list as a primary means of communication/outreach. They will sometimes try to influence issues by holding community meetings and write to council with a joint letter (coordinated offline). Informal networks organize in hyperlocal areas – 'blocks'. Some groups use Nextdoor, but it's mostly for safety concerns, lost and found pets or other items, and more problematic statements, though there are times when a letter written by a council member can create a discussion thread asynchronously on Nextdoor. Younger adults (tech community) tend to use Slack. University students use canvass, WhatsApp, and larger student groups use Slack. Community meetings happen through Community Connectors – mobile/trailer park community centre, public libraries. WhatsApp is preferred among demographic groups – Latino communities for example, and kids act as interpreters for parents (often, for Spanish-speaking population. Lastly, there is a lot of organizing and participation around word of mouth.

Some of our interviewees noted that there while there is some neighborhood participation, and there are some citywide focused groups, there is not a whole lot of cross-pollination of participation across geography. In addition, there have been comments that students and the broader community's interactions (*behavior* or claims about being in transition and not rooted rather than contributing to the economy, paying rent etc.) are often adversarial, but sometimes local groups seek out student involvement.

Scan Themes

There were some common threads in the interviews and other information we gathered concerning City Council meetings and community engagement generally.

Theme 1: Being Heard and Transparency of Decision-Making

One of the important themes that emerged from our conversations revolves around how to create experiences that ensure the public can feel like they're being heard. This includes the creation of safe spaces to give feedback, especially from those that do not tend to provide their thoughts on important issues, and then ensure that the community is circled back to when decisions are being made, with transparency about how their input is being used.

Key quotes:

- "Citizens need to feel they are given an equal shake. The single biggest issue is that people in power, on the agenda proposing something, are given extreme preference to present their position. Citizens are given two minutes, no response, without ability to contact."
- "The toxicity, I think comes back to being a *product* of people not feeling like they're heard."
- "There's a difference between being heard and being listened to, how to meaningfully pull in voices so that we're getting all perspectives, not just conceding to the most prominent voices in the room."
- "There's 108,000 people in Boulder and there's probably 107,000 people we never hear from."
- "Creating a safe space for people to give feedback is lacking right now. If you say something that people don't like it will be screenshotted and posted on Twitter."

- "We've done a lot of engagement over the past 10 years, and it seems like people are even more dissatisfied with the level of engagement."
- "It's unclear how responses from Be Heard Boulder are incorporated in decisions."

Theme 2: Interactions with Elected Officials at Council Meetings and Public Comment

Public comment is an important opportunity for the public to engage with elected officials and staff at Council Meetings. There were a variety of thoughts concerning their experiences and perceptions about how public comment functions. People noted that they feel there is limited innovation applied to these meetings. For example, the public find it difficult to share materials via PowerPoint, and many people who participate digitally are not able to turn their cameras on. There are mixed opinions concerning the duration of public comment, with some people noting that there used to be open comment with no time limits on speakers and now there is a cap on twenty people, whereas others recognize that the length of these meetings are challenging, if not problematic. There is a feeling that public comments are not being listened to, and whether council members can be swayed by the identity of the presenter (which might involve some form of favouritism). While people want some form of recognition after presenting to council, it is unclear by somehow this would occur.

The post-Covid environment opened opportunities to participate digitally, but at the same time it has been difficult for people to connect in person. For some, digital engagement during meetings appears to be disjointed, with a lack of clarity on how the city is providing asynchronous opportunities to participate and how existing digital channels are being tapped into (some groups have used Slack to communicate among each other during council meetings).

Key quotes:

- "You often don't get a response – through email and through public comment."
- "The historical way of engaging the public has been having the space at City Council for members of the public to come and speak and testify. I find that not a particularly helpful or gratifying way to engage on local issues from either side. When you are a community member, you're sort of talking to straight faces who aren't responsive. When you're on council, you're hearing from people at the wrong moment in a project, as people tend to turn out the night of a vote after you've spent six months looking at issues."
- "No indication from those signed up about who the people are, what they are speaking to or a question they might ask."
- "There is a point about having to digest questions on the spot and how to give a meaningful response immediately."
- "The climate now is one where the public are hyper focused on openness and transparency, and there's a feeling that council already knows the direction it is voting, and new meetings might have no new information."

Theme 3: Equity and Engagement

Equity was a consistent theme throughout the interviews, particularly in terms of the ability of under-represented members of the community to be actively and consistently engaged in and informed about issues being considered by City Council. One of the more concerning reflections about equity is the

difficulty that Latino/a community's experience in trying to engage with Council. We heard "disrespect" reflected in a lack of acknowledgement by city leaders of the people of color who sit on boards/commissions, questioning why they lend their time and expertise if they are not considered to be a resource. We also heard a reluctance to participate and be engaged as a person of color because "we don't really know how to speak the language that they use in meetings" and "we are not as comfortable as others in standing up in a meeting at a microphone." We also heard the difficulty and stress of being a person of color in a work environment that is not diverse. The issues are sensitive and cannot go unnoticed or without reference in this project.

While the Community Connectors program has acted as a segue into various communities, it is noted that they do not engage on all issues before council. People commented on how the staff sometimes does their own outreach, but this can vary depending on the meeting, and more proactive outreach for all boards must reflect with workload and staff hours (time and resources). In terms of direct engagement by under-represented communities there is a simultaneous accessibility awareness of translation services, but also an intimidation factor in presenting before council. Here, some people suggested that official meetings should be conducted where people are already congregating. There were adjacent concerns around the timing of when information goes out, how to sign up to receive information about city council items.

 Key quotes:

- "Meetings can be intimidating and uncomfortable if you don't know the right way (or the expected way) to communicate and what to say in a few minutes.3 It takes a lot of time to prepare for some people and no one wants to look ill prepared, especially if you are a person of color."
- "Do people know they can speak in Spanish?"
- "You can get information for public meetings if you're already signed up to email list, or if you visit the website."
- "Hotline has potential but sign up is not easy, challenges with getting emails registered and people decline to move forward."
- "Even the more informed (and pay attention) aren't always privy to what's going on."
- "Community connectors is a lot of work, and it's also not done on every issue."
- "If the mountain doesn't come to you, go to the mountain."
- Wanda James, CU Regent who also identifies as African American, stated "we've seen a 40% increase of applications have come in to the University of Colorado, and hoping to see that represents more Black and Latinos coming to Boulder."
- It (Boulder) is "an unwelcoming city," said James, "It is a rich white society in Boulder...and you don't see a lot of diversity." There is "no downside in embracing diversity."

Theme 4: Boards, Working Groups and Sub-Committees

Our conversations also led to comments about bodies adjacent to city council. There is some concern about specific aspects and functionality of boards and subcommittees, particularly in the training of members, the remit and scope of their ability to do engagement, and how well they operate in terms of inclusivity practices for under-represented groups in their meetings. So, there are open questions about working groups in terms of how they tap into community participation and feedback, a lack of clarity on

what to do with their input, and how participation impacts being and feeling heard if these bodies are purely advisory.

Key quotes:

- "Previously, boards would be proactive in discussing matters, and now are reactive dealing with whatever staff brings, and the schedule is packed with things being pushed to future meetings."
- "Applying for a board is a challenge despite being bilingual now. The issue further compounded by how information is presented to other non-English primary households. Benefits of working on a board that people don't understand, what and how to do the work."
- "Boards are limited and don't have certain training. Some boards need to train in Roberts Rules of Order and facilitation."
- "Board meetings only online with no prospect of going back in person. Issues of being understaffed, trouble retaining members, takes staff to run meetings and not many people assigned."
- "The engagement subcommittee can reject ideas for implementation. Raises the question about how innovation can move forward. What are the powers of this committee."
- "Same people showing up – "I know every person on this, you know, group and it tells me that it's not a representative group."
- "Youth Opportunity Advisory Board has been in place for a long time but has had issues with keeping active members engaged. Focus on mental health support and addressing distrust of government. Identity issues and being seen are challenges. Homelessness a topic sometimes climate action and economic situations."

Civic Engagement Scorecard Highlights

The civic engagement scorecard has been used at 7 city council meetings as of December 21, 2023. Full Scorecard results are in Appendix A. Here are some interesting highlights about public experiences at the council meetings they attended. Nearly have of the participants felt their overall experience was good. For a vast majority of people this was not their first time attending a council meeting, and they did so in person. There is a near 50/50 split between people hearing about meetings either through word of mouth or on the city's website. People overwhelmingly feel that the meeting offers them a chance to feel heard, and yet what they'd want to change is to have greater transparency concerning how their input is factored into decisions. Members of the public noted that there is a strong sense of community support among each other but that it feels like it is the same people doing most of this participation. There are concerns that people do not mix beyond their own groups. Most of the participants were female, Caucasian, older than 40 and long-time residents. No submissions were made in either Spanish or Nepali.

Center for Democracy Innovation Recommendations

The following recommendations are intended to work within existing legal frameworks such as Colorado's Open Meeting Laws, the City Charter and Rules of Procedure. However, there are elements

that could be strengthened by adjustments to select laws that impact the format of participation at public meetings.

Though only the first recommendation centers on the city council meetings themselves, *all* of the recommendations would help to make council meetings more efficient, information-rich, widely attended, and connected to other conversations in the community.

Improving public meetings, and strengthening engagement generally, should be a community-wide priority. Elected officials, staff, and other community members all have roles to play. This work should be led by a diverse, cross-sector set of community leaders who are tasked with considering and adapting these recommendations, overseeing implementation, and measuring their impacts. There are many ways to structure this – it could be an existing committee, subcommittee, or commission, or a new one – but whatever the format, we feel it should draw on the leadership and buy-in of leaders inside and outside local government. The table below suggests the roles that elected officials, staff, and other community members could play:

Council members	City dept. heads and staff	Other community leaders and residents
• Recruit participants (spans recommendations 1-5) • Support staff, other community leaders in their engagement work (1-5) • Clearly communicate how engagement affected decisions (1-3)	• Structure, facilitate deliberation at council meetings (1) • Manage digital engagement (2) • Manage engagement leading to/from council retreat (3)	• Recruit participants (1-5) • Practice engagement skills in other settings (4-5) • Bring council questions, topics into other settings (4-5)

Recommendation 1: Replace the open public comment segment at council meetings with an open deliberative process, and rotate council meetings among different locations in Boulder

The interactions between community members, council members, and staff at official public meetings are frustrating and unproductive, according to members of all three groups. There are concerns that the lack of connection and dialogue makes public participation at the council meetings very limited. Community members also express the concern that their input at meetings does not influence public decisions. Overall, these meetings lack the qualities that make people feel heard.

Based on our reading of Colorado's open meeting laws, there is no specific legal requirement to host a general call to the public for open comments at the beginning of the agenda, or to use the conventional open-microphone format. (There is, however, a requirement to allow public hearing and comment on quasi-judicial agenda items, where the council is making a decision on a zoning variance or a similarly narrow question). Our recommendation is *not* to abandon the core values of public comment, but rather to reinforce them by using a new, better format.

We recommend you implement this recommendation by:

1. Starting with the *'Chats with Council'* already being held periodically in Boulder
2. Then including a deliberative segment at *Study Sessions* with opportunities for public participation (allowable upon the recommendation of the Chair, as per rules of procedure).

> ***Special Sessions*** can also experiment with this process, upon the recommendation of the Chair (allowable per rules of procedure)
3. Subsequently, piloting a deliberative open public comment at City Council meetings.

The new deliberative segments at council meetings should use the following format:

A. Participants are sorted randomly into groups of 4-8 as they arrive
B. Council members and staff join groups (***no more than one council member*** per group in order to comply with open meetings law)
C. Topics are determined beforehand, and included in all descriptions/promotion of the meeting
   a. Topics can include more general questions as well as items on the agenda
   b. However, quasi-judicial items ***cannot be included*** in this segment – public comment on those items must continue to be conducted pursuant to Chapter 1-3, Quasi-Judicial Hearings, B.R.C. 1981.
   c. "Potential future council agenda items" should always be listed on the agenda
D. Each group has a facilitator, trained beforehand (in addition to city staff, these could be Community Connectors or other Boulder engagement leaders, see below), whose job is to:
   a. Help group set ground rules
   b. Ensure that everyone has a chance to speak
   c. Help manage the time
   d. Introduce any discussion questions that have been provided
   e. Help the group decide who will report out from their conversation OR help the group use the digital reporting process (see below)
E. The group discusses other topics first, then potential future Council agenda items in the last part of the discussion
F. Results of the small groups are shared, and entered in the public record, in one of two ways:
   a. Reporter from each group summarizes the discussion OR
   b. Participants give their comments/answers via live polling, and results are displayed on a big screen
   c. As part of the live polling or through a question on the Engagement Scorecard, participants vote on which potential future agenda items should be prioritized/recommended for the council
G. At the end of the hour, mayor thanks participants for their time and ideas, and explains that council members will use the results in their deliberations and consider the potential agenda items for future meetings. According to the charter, the mayor can also request that staff follow up with questions that emerged during the session, and ask members of the public to give a one-minute clarification.
H. For particularly important and challenging issues, the Council can consider using more intensive deliberative discussions, including:
   a. Study Sessions with opportunities for public participation (allowable upon the recommendation of the Chair, as per rules of procedure)
   b. Special Sessions, upon the recommendation of the Chair (allowable upon the recommendation of the Chair, as per rules of procedure)

The interviews we conducted and the baseline data from the scorecard suggest that there are committed residents that are actively involved in engaging with council, and in their community more broadly, but that these tend to be the same people, and different groups of residents, do not often mix.

Groups in Boulder tend to gather and participate in certain neighborhoods and facilities that the City of Boulder might tap into to draw more people into participating at City Council meetings.

Therefore, we recommend that City Council meetings be held in different areas of Boulder. The considerations for this would include:

- Vetting spaces and working with facility security to ensure the necessary safety precautions are taken to support the new meeting location.
- Utilizing trusted spaces that particular residents of Boulder already use to draw in the participation of under-represented members of the community. One example would be to host City Council at the University, drawing key partners to undertake targeted recruitment with segments of the community that may have a particular interest in catered agenda items for that meeting.

Recommendation 2: Upgrade the city's digital engagement capacity in one or both of two ways:
- **Use a texting-enabled engagement process to encourage, facilitate, and aggregate small-group deliberation before, during, and after council meetings, AND/OR**
- **Change the way the city conducts surveys: avoid 'survey fatigue' and create a more continuous, flexible, trust-building public opinion capacity by creating a large, standing survey panel**

City staff are working to maintain two digital engagement opportunities: BeHeard Boulder and the Boulder City Council Hotline. Neither effort seems to be complementing the City Council meetings well, and neither of them seems integrated into the overall engagement strategy of the city. Both avenues offer one-off, one-way opportunities for residents to make comments or complaints, but neither allows for effective discussion among residents or a snapshot of what the whole community might think about an issue.

Public meetings would be complemented by, and the city would benefit from, digital engagement opportunities that were more interactive and built a stronger ongoing relationship between decision-makers and community members. Here are two options, which could be pursued separately or together:

A. Use texting-enabled engagement to encourage, facilitate, and aggregate small face-to-face conversations happening wherever and whenever is convenient for residents.
   a. Deliberative discussions in groups of 2-4 people are effective for helping people learn about issues, consider their options, and decide together what they want to do. Digital texting platforms can structure and connect those discussions, allowing large numbers of people to contribute ideas, find information, answer questions, and engage in a statewide or national process. The potential of this format has been demonstrated by "Text, Talk, Act," which over the last eight years has involved over 200,000 Americans in productive deliberation on mental health issues.
   b. Participating in a texting-enabled process is simple. Whenever and wherever they want, participants text a keyword (like "master plan") to a pre-assigned number and then receive a series of text messages, including:
      i. information on the topic (sometimes in the form of links to videos);
      ii. questions for discussion (if you are in a group of 2-4) or reflection (if you are on your own);

      iii.   process suggestions;

      iv.   polling questions; and

      v.   requests to respond with action ideas and commitments they will make.

   c.   Each text the participant receives includes a keyword to use in their response in order to get the next text from the platform.

   d.   Throughout the process, participants also receive links that allow them to see how other people participating in the process have responded to the polling and action questions.

   e.   In addition to helping people make better decisions, a texting-enabled process can provide city officials and staff with a sampling of public opinion. Though not as scientific as a random-sample poll, an SMS-based engagement strategy builds in information and deliberation, so that participant responses are more informed and considered.

   f.   This process could be used to structure the small-group discussions at council meetings, making human facilitation easier (or even superfluous). It also provides council members and other leaders an easy way to bring city topics and decisions into other community meetings.

B.   Establish a standing survey panel (see [BeHeard CVA](#) as one example) of hundreds and potentially thousands of Boulder residents

   a.   Recruit broadly from different segments of the community

   b.   Encourage residents to opt-in and customize the frequency, issue areas, and locations

   c.   Collect demographic information from members when they sign up

   d.   People who do not live in Boulder but have some stake in its success (they work there, own property there, etc.) can join, and state that relationship as part of the demographics

   e.   Translate each survey into Spanish and Nepali

   f.   Continue to recruit participants and refer back to results of the surveys, so that the group grows and diversifies over time (but representativeness of sample is always clear)

   g.   If the council decides to organize a citizen's assembly (see below), use the survey panel to recruit assembly participants

These digital strategies could be used to complement City Council meetings by: allowing residents a chance to suggest, learn about, and prioritize future Council agenda items; allowing the Council to gather informed input on issues they are considering; giving people who cannot attend in-person meetings a chance to contribute.

The use of either of these strategies, along with the other recommendations, would create an environment where resident ideas and suggestions were more informed and received more consideration by other residents (as well as officials and staff) - see the illustration below. This would make residents more likely to feel heard.

Phase 1: Idea emerges

Idea first comes up in setting such as:
- Discussion in community meeting
- Survey panel
- Deliberative session at council meeting

Phase 2: Idea is explored and discussed

More people learn about idea in settings such as:
- Discussion in community meeting
- Deliberative session at council meeting
- Council Study Session
- Citizens' Assembly

Phase 3: Decisions

Actions are taken on idea through:
- Council discussion/vote
- Staff action
- Ballot initiative
- Community members help with complementary actions

Recommendation 3: Establish engagement opportunities (drawing on strategies mentioned above) that inform and are informed by the annual council retreat, including more intensive efforts such as a Citizen's Assembly on a particularly critical priority

In Boulder, the annual City Council Retreat produces a list of priorities that shapes the Council's work for a long period of time. Subsequently, Council members have noted that residents criticize them on specific issues and decisions without realizing that these priorities stem from the Retreat. Therefore, some of the frustration that the community directs at the council might be circumvented by carving out an opportunity to understand, learn from, and contribute to the Retreat.

This participation could involve several opportunities:

A. Before the Retreat:
   a. Use the standing survey panel or texting-enabled engagement process (see above) to field questions about what priorities the council should focus on over the next 1-2 years
B. During the Retreat:
   a. Hold an in-person public world café at the Retreat (see example from Reading, Massachusetts) to help councilmembers and community members learn more about the issues that the community are most interested in. This could further be supported by a zoom plenary/breakout conversation.
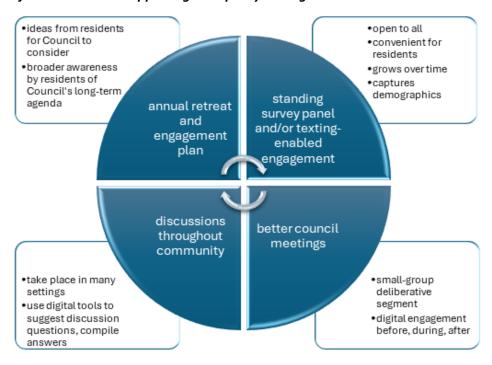C. After the Retreat:
   a. Adapt the Boulder Civic Engagement Scorecard to gather input on how citizens are feeling about the plan and display the ongoing Scorecard results and plan indicators on a public dashboard.
   b. Potentially field another survey that explains the councilmember conclusions that shaped the plan and gathers input on how to refine, engage community on, and act on

the plan – including ways that citizens can contribute directly to the implementation of some aspects of the plan as volunteers

    c. For a major community issue or priority, Council should consider holding a Citizen's Assembly. Citizens' Assemblies are:
   - i. Intensive deliberations that typically last several days
   - ii. Participants are selected randomly (if Boulder institutes a survey panel, that would serve as an efficient means of selection)
   - iii. Participants learn from experts, deliberate on the pros and cons of the issues, and make recommendations to Council. One appropriate opportunity for a citizens' assembly is the updating of the Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan.

    d. Finally, for particularly important decisions or for changes to the city charter, the Council should consider a ballot initiative.

Improving Council meetings, upgrading digital engagement capacity, and linking both to the annual Retreat could produce a more effective cycle of engagement, as illustrated below.

Cycle of communication supporting local policymaking in Boulder

Recommendation 4: Upgrade the community infrastructure for engagement by creating supports for productive dialogue on timely issues in a range of settings

Renovating the "ground floor of democracy" in Boulder will help support and improve all of the processes described above. The community already has a range of neighborhood associations, homeowner's groups, service clubs, university-based groups, and local online networks that bring people together around issues of common concern. The city also supports a Community Connectors program in order to amplify diverse community voices, as well as a variety of boards and commissions. We want to encourage further thinking about to advance these programs to draw in the Hispanic community in particular.

Encouraging and supporting those groups to engage their members more effectively will not only help the leaders of those networks, it will make the work of council members and staff easier and more effective.

This work is particularly important for one aspect of improving official public meetings: getting help from a wide range of community leaders will be ***essential for increasing and diversifying turnout*** at the meetings and other engagement opportunities. The deliberative techniques described in the first recommendation above will be far more meaningful if employed with a diverse array of 50 people than with an homogeneous group of eight.

We suggest that city officials, staff, other community leaders, and residents:
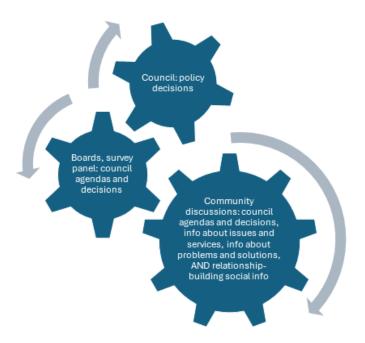
A. Use the connections mapped in the civic infrastructure scan to encourage community leaders to recruit participants for council meetings, the survey panel, and other participation opportunities
B. Include discussion questions and suggestions in survey panel surveys, or use texting-enabled engagement, to give engagement leaders a tool they can bring to other community meetings
C. Hold community-wide social events that bring leaders and members of these networks together (particularly in ways that emphasize fun: food, games, music, sports, and theater)
D. Produce an annual report on the overall health of civic groups

This work on Boulder's civic infrastructure would better convene and connect discussions about the city and its future (see illustration below, showing what kinds of things people are talking about, and where the conversations are happening).

Gear 1: Electeds and staff (government)

Gear 2: Appointeds (adjacent to government)

Gear 3: Community

Recommendation 5: Upgrade Boulder's engagement skill base by offering an annual training workshop for Council members and other Boulder engagement leaders

One key shift is to change the expectations (and skill set) of leaders from a representative model to a represent + engage model. Rather than asking people to speak for their peers, you want them to speak for AND bring their peers into the discussion, in a range of ways (in-person engagement, participation in surveys, engagement online). This means explicitly encouraging "engagement leadership" and providing skills and tools to help them embody it.

An annual engagement training would allow Council members, Community Connectors, members of boards and commissions, and leaders of civic groups to explore topics such as:

A. Strategies and tools for outreach, recruitment, and relational organizing (including digital tools like Outreach Circle)
B. Facilitation of in-person and zoom meetings
C. Organizing fun: incorporating food, games, music, sports, and theater in engagement (and vice versa)
D. Bringing people who belong to local digital networks together for in-person events, and encouraging in-person event participants to join local digital networks
E. Using the civic infrastructure scan to identify where people are already gathering, and bringing issues to them – this is true of both in-person and online conversations (for example, there are Hispanic community members using WhatsApp, and young professionals using Slack)
F. Strategies and tools for live polling and decision-making (including digital tools such as Mentimeter)
G. Strategies and tools for measuring participant satisfaction (including tools such as the Engagement Scorecard)

For each of the engagement opportunities described below, the Council should clarify the role that they are asking the public to play, using the IAP2 Spectrum (see chart below for suggestions on where activities fit on the Spectrum).
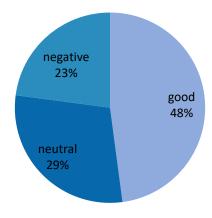
IAP2 spectrum

developed by the international association for public participation
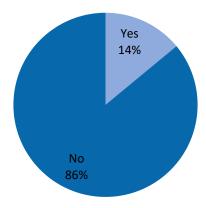
	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decision.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

Discussions in community meetings	Survey panel	Deliberative sessions at council meetings	Special Sessions of council?	Ballot initiatives
World café before retreat	World café before retreat	Texting-enabled engagement	Texting-enabled engagement	
	Discussions in community meetings	Survey panel	Citizens' assembly	

Appendix A: Civic Engagement Scorecard
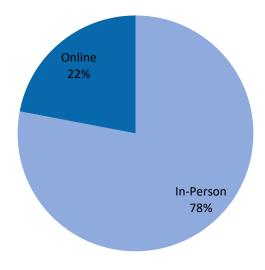
1.How would you rate your experience at this meeting?

negative 23%

good 48%

neutral 29%
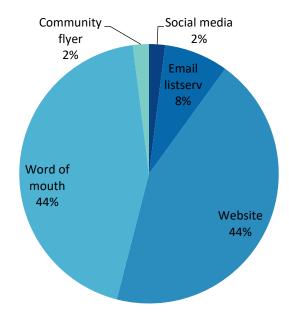
2.Is this the first time you have attended this type of meeting?

Yes 14%

No 86%
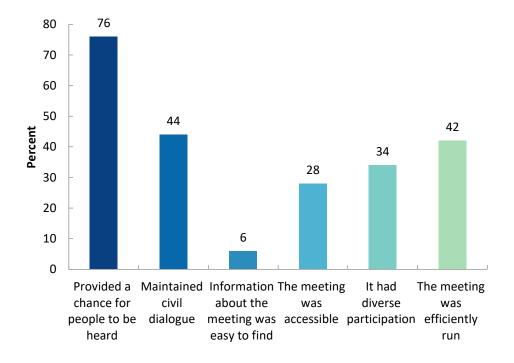
3.How did you participate in this meeting?

Online
22%

In-Person
78%
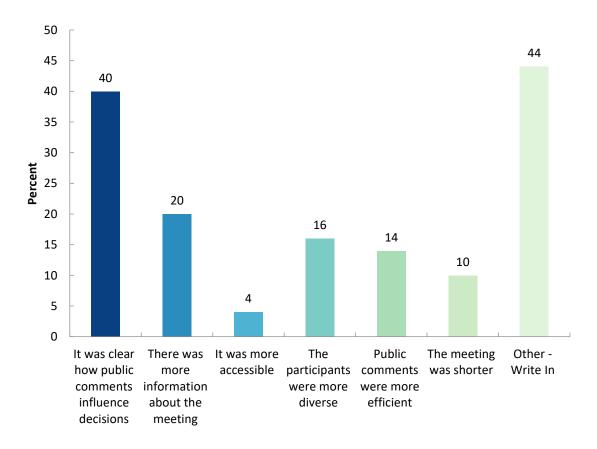
4.How did you hear about this meeting?

Community
flyer
2%

Social media
2%

Email
listserv
8%

Word of
mouth
44%

Website
44%

5.What was good about the meeting (select up to 3)?

Percent

- Provided a chance for people to be heard: 76
- Maintained civil dialogue: 44
- Information about the meeting was easy to find: 6
- The meeting was accessible: 28
- It had diverse participation: 34
- The meeting was efficiently run: 42

6.The meeting would be better if (select up to 3):

Percent

- It was clear how public comments influence decisions: 40
- There was more information about the meeting: 20
- It was more accessible: 4
- The participants were more diverse: 16
- Public comments were more efficient: 14
- The meeting was shorter: 10
- Other - Write In: 44

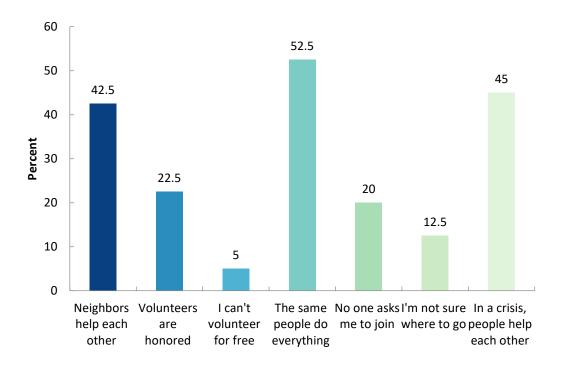| Other - Write In	Count
3 minute limit instead of 2	1
A brief chance to reply to other comments	1
BRIEF feedback be given from the Council on the comments.	1
I believe the two minute limitation on public comments is too narrow. It leads to confused and over-urgent comments being made. People need at least 1 minute to breathe if they have to consolidate their comments to 2 minutes. Please return us to the 3 minute standard allocation for public meetings.	1
I couldn't hear all the speakers	1
If disruptive behavior from the public never occurred 🙏 🌻 🙏	1
If there was on the spot sign ups to speak when all comment slots are not filled. Otherwise it's absolutely perfect. And I'm always speaking when I can and want to.	1
If we had 3 minutes. Every other large city in Colorado allows 3 5 or 6 minutes!	1
Impossible to hear open comments from the audience. Can you amplify more?	1
Nothing I would change...but would add in person sign up for unfilled open comment slots.	1
People were rudely cut off after 2 minutes	1
PowerPoint should be shown to the public online	1
Public input should stay 'on topic'	1
Some one would notify the speaker to get closer to the microphone so the rest of us could hear them.	1
Speakers at "public participation" had three minutes!	1
Speakers at public participation had three minutes!	1
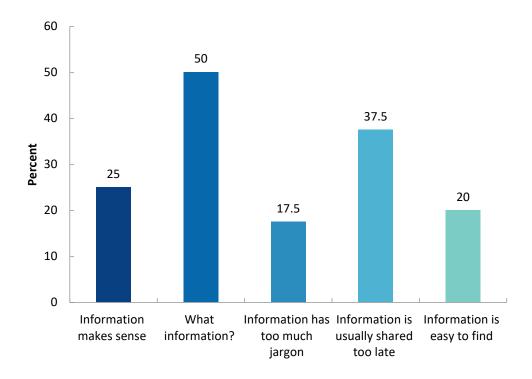
We had the chance to respond when Parks and Rec comes and doesn't represent the problem correctly	1
council should challenge staff reports. Report are not supported with data.	1
if it were easier to hear the council members when speaking, that would be better. Sometimes they do not speak into the mic.	1
shorter staff presentations. have more links vs long staff memos	1
we had fewer progressives voting against majority voter positions	1
your system does not account for delays in electronic mail transmission making me late for the meeting. I received notice that I could speak at 6:00 PM.	1
Totals	22

Describe the Community in terms of:
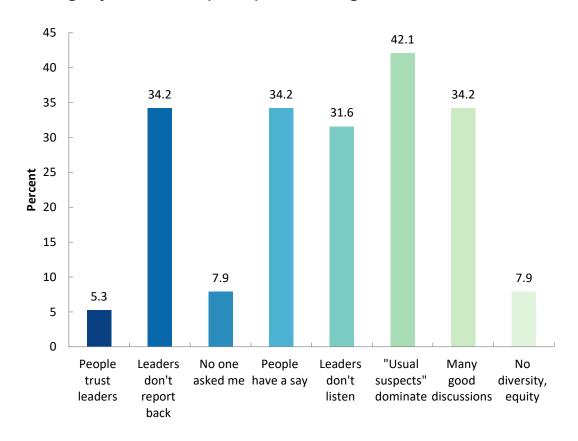
7.Volunteering? (pick up to three tags)
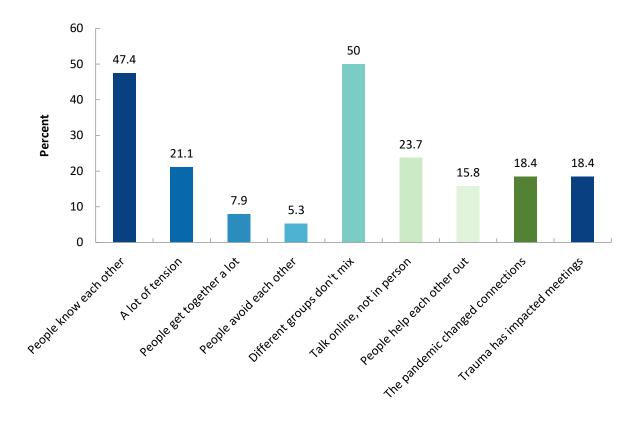
8.Sharing information? (pick up to three tags)

Bar chart — Percent:
- Information makes sense: 25
- What information?: 50
- Information has too much jargon: 17.5
- Information is usually shared too late: 37.5
- Information is easy to find: 20
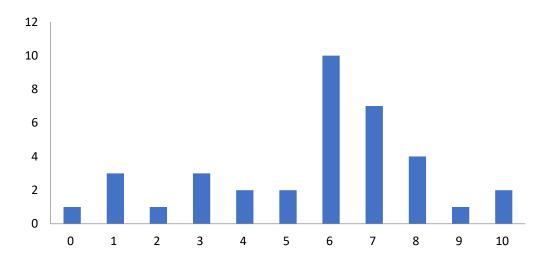
9.Making key decisions? (pick up to three tags)

Bar chart — Percent:
- People trust leaders: 5.3
- Leaders don't report back: 34.2
- No one asked me: 7.9
- People have a say: 34.2
- Leaders don't listen: 31.6
- "Usual suspects" dominate: 42.1
- Many good discussions: 34.2
- No diversity, equity: 7.9
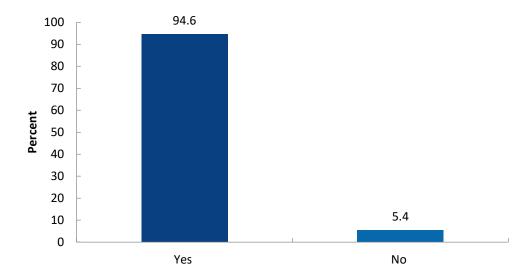
10. Being connected? (pick up to three tags)

Chart showing "Percent" on y-axis (0 to 60) with the following values:
- People know each other: 47.4
- A lot of tension: 21.1
- People get together a lot: 7.9
- People avoid each other: 5.3
- Different groups don't mix: 50
- Talk online, not in person: 23.7
- People help each other out: 15.8
- The pandemic changed connections: 18.4
- Trauma has impacted meetings: 18.4
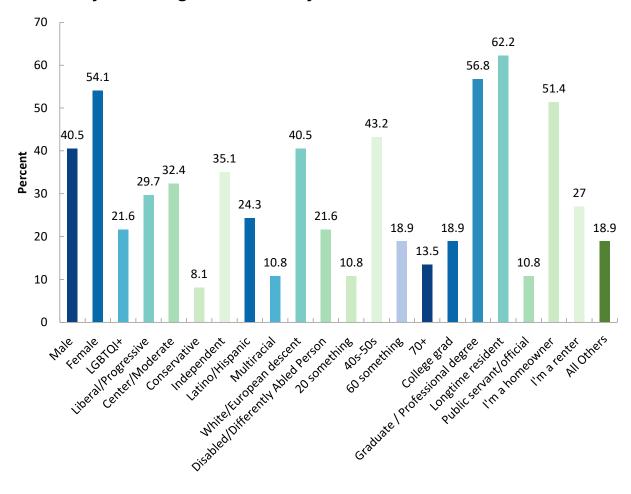
11. How much do you feel like you matter to your community? (move the dot)

Bar chart (y-axis 0 to 12) with values by rating:
- 0: 1
- 1: 3
- 2: 1
- 3: 3
- 4: 2
- 5: 2
- 6: 10
- 7: 7
- 8: 4
- 9: 1
- 10: 2

12. Do you live in Boulder

13.Select any and all tags that describe you:

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Introduction to the project

- Script here for context:
  - The Center for Democracy Innovation at the National Civic League is working on a project funded by the American Arbitration Association-Institute for Conflict and Dispute Resolution Foundation. The project is about making official public meetings better – meaning any Council, Board or Commission that works in an official capacity that makes decisions on behalf of a community and involves public participation and input. Many of these meetings are facing significant challenges, and yet, much of the focus on governance and public engagement innovation is not focused on official meetings, but interactions that happen outside these processes. We want to use community engaged research to support changes to how official meetings can operate in safer, more efficient, and participatory ways.
- Interviews with government staff and community members and organizations make up one aspect of our research - we will not use names unless asked in advance and follow Chatham Rules of anonymity.

Questions:

About their role and work

- Can you tell us a little bit about your role, organization, and the type of work you do?
- Are there specific initiatives and/or projects you can highlight about how you engage the public?

About their community

- What are the biggest strengths of the community?
- Can you describe your community, in terms of:
  - How people are organized, are there neighborhood associations, grassroots organizations, or other types of association?
  - Are there certain types of engagement that the community gravitates toward and have you tapped into these processes more?
  - What are some of the big issues the public are concerned about?
    - Any issues of polarization?
  - Is there collaboration between community members (across geography or demographics)?

About the specific interactions/designs of official public meetings

- Are there strengths to how official meetings operate?
  - Are these only in-person, are they online – are the asynchronous opportunities to engage with the process outside of the meeting?
- In terms of the details of the public meetings, can you further elaborate on:
  - How the community engages with these meetings and who shows up?
  - How they are publicized
  - Outreach to communities,
    - How are under-represented populations encouraged to participate

- o   How public comments function
- o   How public input is factored into decision-making
- Are there relevant past initiatives or experiences involving public engagement exercises?

About roadblocks to public engagement

- What are the biggest roadblocks to engagement in community forums and public meetings?
- Has the pandemic affected participation and engagement?

About innovating official public meetings

- If you could make slight adjustments to improve the quality of life of public meetings, what would this entail?
- If you could make larger and longer-term changes, what would you like to see happen to public meetings?
- Are there past experiences/lessons that are helpful to apply to future practices?
- Any thoughts on how to better tap into community involvement?

End of Interview

- Do you have any questions for us?

Appendix C: Interviewee Ideas to Enhance Engagement

We asked interviewees for some short and long-term recommendations. The table below outlines some of this information based upon topics that the recommendations align with.

Theme	INTERVENTION
Language and Translation	- Possibly host separate Spanish meetings, or in translated situations, talk about what's important not strictly technicalities. - More awareness building around the available option of speaking in Spanish at public meetings
Outreach to under-represented groups	- Paid door knockers, a style familiar to the Mexican/Latin American community. - Build awareness on how to sign up to speak at council meetings. - Community connectors – think about bringing community members, not just the connectors to meetings, and engage earlier in a process rather than later. - Are utilities collecting phone numbers, are numbers publicly available – is texting a possibility. - Tap into the Hispanic community, student community WhatsApp groups. - Engage students on relevant issues. Also, build student awareness about the difference between City and University jurisdictions.
Community – City social relations	- Continued walks with council/boards and community. - Attend more social events.
Direct lines of communication to elected officials	- Council members directly reply, without an intermediary (communications/engagement staff). Are council members in a maximum position to interact with the public. Public comments are a one-way interaction. - Due to limitations of public comment, there is still an opportunity for clarifying questions to take place.

	• Working on open meeting laws to host two council member town hall meetings (three constitutes quorum for an open meeting). • Experiment with less staff contact and more elected official contact
Solicit input early	• Alter the agenda setting process – engaging early not later in a policy cycle.
Accountability	• Have the public review engagement mechanisms and activities.
Balancing subject expert perspectives	• Invitations to testify based on opposing views on an issue.
Public Comment	• Thanking public commenters, acknowledge them and their time.
Deliberation	• Not only about what messages are/rules are but also how to create spaces to problem solve. • Instead of having people sign up to give public comments, give them an extra hour once a month where there can be a back and forth. • Use a racial equity instrument to hear from community. • "Why don't we have engagement two weeks before a final vote to marinate on public testimony."
Location and accessibility	• While some council members go to community events a couple at a time, can we host a council meeting at central/civic park to make people feel comfortable. • Reflect on welcoming environment as opposed to intimidating official spaces. • How to encourage mothers to attend – childcare, dinner provided • Use the University as an anchor institution to host a city council meeting, or a study session, think about the legality of it. Have a public forum on campus, not just a town hall but a formal/official event with all members, bring government.
Inclusive strategic planning	• Have a public event/hearing at the retreat regarding the issues that the council is going to talk about for the next two years and to ensure engagement at that meeting not just talking about the contours of an ordinance.
Publicity	• Tap into the column, daily camera for public engagement. Pick an issue and debate in the news/media with various points of view and early on. • Particularly for under-represented groups, consider messaging, how things translate to having an impact on lives, educate people of why it matters.
Notices	• Have a look at how notices are being done in adjacent areas, i.e. County Commissioner, much more information provided than what's included in Boulder's.

Augmenting official engagement	• Give the council members a heads up about what types of issues and comments or questions will be asked in advance, allowing them to think about it. Alternatively, provide the email of the presenter to the councilmember to follow up with.
	• Don't have public hearings the night of votes. Have public hearings on the first reading rather than the second reading.
	• Elongated processes that might take more time to build meaningful engagement into council meetings.
	    o Allow council members to digest what they hear and deliberate at the next meeting.
	    o Taking time to sit on public comments and carving out time at subsequent meetings to deliberate.

Professional development	• Having a balance between efficiency, laws, public relations/communications versus facilitating discussions and figuring out to involve the public on complicated issues. • Formal training for board members on Roberts rules of order

Appendix D: References

Open Meetings Law: https://leg.colorado.gov/sites/default/files/open-meeting-requirements-of-the-colorado-sunshine-law.pdf

City Charter: https://library.municode.com/co/boulder/codes/municipal_code?nodeId=THCHBOCO

Rules of Procedure: https://bouldercolorado.gov/media/8165/download?inline=

Team Tipton, Design the Future Report for City of Boulder Public Works and Planning & Development Services: https://work-static.bouldercolorado.gov/docs/TT,_City_of_Boulder,_PW_and_P&DS_Design_the_Future,_Insights_and_Implications,_All_Staff,_DECK,_09_10_2019_(V2.4)-1-201909091902.pdf