



ON THE FRONT LINES
OF TODAY'S CITIES:

Civil Discourse, Engagement and Trust Building

About the National League of Cities

The National League of Cities (NLC) is the voice of America's cities, towns and villages, representing more than 200 million people. NLC works to strengthen local leadership, influence federal policy and drive innovative solutions.

About the Center for Municipal Practice

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

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Acknowledgements

The authors wish to offer special thanks to Sara Boyle, Diversity Advantage Team, Bellevue, WA; Mayor Alfred Mae Drakeford, Camden, SC; Kari Watkins, President and CEO, Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum; Mayor Pro Tem Patricia Lockwood, Fenton, MI; Billy Owens, Assistant to the City Manager, North Richland Hills, TX and Anne Phelan, Editor for their contributions to this report.

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FOREWORD

In a prior report, *On the Front Lines of Today's Cities: Trauma, Challenges and Solutions*, NLC probed the coarsening of American civic culture and the anger and violence often prevalent in the process of public decision-making. We explored the conditions (harassment, threats, assault or violence), and we assessed the causes (polarization, disinformation and the pushback against inclusive political participation). The conclusions were that these issues are real and widespread, and that they reap a heavy toll on public servants.

This new resource builds on that research, focusing on the recommendation to “improve civil discourse.” This publication highlights on-the-ground examples and practices in cities that focus on:

- 1. Respectful and courteous (civil) behavior by public officials**, and by extension the city residents to whom they are accountable
- 2. Transparency in process and completeness in communications** relating to government decision-making toward the goal of diminishing misinformation and misunderstandings
- 3. Genuine, open, inclusive and participatory public engagement and public decision-making** using the most diverse and state-of-the-art tools available

This resource gives local leaders insights into the strategies behind these practices and shares considerations needed to replicate or adapt them. NLC conducted first-person interviews, hosted focus groups and targeted surveys, and consulted with experts in the field to create this report.

We believe that local governments are the model for participatory decision-making devoid of the coarse and polarized environment that often inhabits the state and federal levels. Certainly, city and town residents disagree over policy priorities, and they do so with passion and vigor. But it also can be said that the spirit of civility, compromise and moderation remains the hallmark of governing at the local level. Thus, local leaders are well-positioned to help our communities come together, to heal where necessary and to make community decisions planning for the long-term. This report is intended to advance these goals.



CLARENCE E. ANTHONY

CEO AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
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INTRODUCTION

Elected leaders at all government levels are contending with several conditions that make their jobs more difficult. Among the most pressing is a declining trust in public institutions. [Data from the Pew Research Center](#) tracking trust in scientists, journalists, elected officials, and religious and business leaders all turned downward in the February 2022 reporting. This is coupled with increasing polarization and nationalization of the political process, and incivility within and toward government and government officials.

The world and our communities are more complex today than at any point in history. Adding to that dynamic are the increased harassment and threats that local leaders receive, making governing more difficult than ever. As noted in the initial *Frontlines* report in 2021, more than eight in ten local officials reported experiencing harassment, threats and violence, and 87 percent reported noticing a rise in such instances during their time in office. The harassment is disproportionately directed at women and people of color.

When Americans are asked about trust in government, the highest levels of trust are found in local governments. The levels of trust in government get lower and lower the further away you are from the people being governed. Because of the high level of trust found at the local level, it means that our local leaders can have the greatest impact in turning around the trend of increased violence and harassment.

Local leaders are models for behaviors needed for a healthy democracy when they denounce offensive and violent rhetoric, regardless of who the perpetrator might be. Beyond setting the example for residents, local leaders can act as conveners to bring different communities and constituencies together to address shared needs.

Without acting locally, the cycle of violence and cynicism will continue to grow and further erode our faith in government institutions. More tragic is the departure of individuals in public service to help their community be a better place to live, work and play. Our communities are strong because of their diversity. Silencing and driving away voices from the public sphere will darken the vibrant places we call home.



Experiences in Civil Discourse

CROSS-CULTURAL CENTER WITHOUT WALLS

Bellevue, WA



The Challenge

Twenty years ago, Bellevue was a majority-White bedroom community with no high-rise real estate and a homogenous residential population. Today, the city is 53 percent people of color with Asian and South Asian populations the largest groups after the White population. The rapid demographic changes disrupted aspects of community cohesion. Differences began to grow wider, more pronounced and more polarized. The community was experiencing change in its culture, values and priorities. In 2014, the city adopted a whole-community diversity plan identifying 60 goals for community building including a diversity institute to build bridges between and among communities.



The Strategy

Bellevue subsequently agreed to launch a cross-cultural initiative in 2016. The vision was to bring people of all cultures together to learn, understand and build relationships to work together on the development of shared goals. The city sought to build the capacity to conduct this work within the community and with community-based partners.

The concept generated a series of feasibility studies including a needs assessment to test cross-cultural programming via a survey and localized convenings, which brought together more than 500 people. One question was what possible services and opportunities might be delivered by the development of an actual cross-cultural center. Studies in 2018 and 2022 looked at options for physical space and operating models – city-owned, managed by a nonprofit, etc.

A budget was approved for further concept development and for exploration of possible nonprofit partners. The city intends to fund the program but will not run it. Three local workshops were conducted in Autumn 2023. Seventy topic ideas were generated to define “culture” and identify areas for focus. These workshops were conducted in multiple languages using a process for good civic engagement and open dialogue known as the Pomegranate Method developed by Milenko Matanovic, founder of the Pomegranate Center in Seattle. Process is really the product: the process of opening a dialogue is intended to foster co-creation, inclusion and transparency.

Bellevue invested \$800,000 in the last 10 years for feasibility studies, surveys, forums, RFPs and pilot program implementation.

Based on opportunities, a physical building for a cross-cultural center may still come to pass. In the near term, programming is actively underway. The city is partnering to leverage spaces, identify issues of concern, and take up themes that have broader community relevance.



Lessons

1. The city took a methodical approach of step-by-step planning and implementation. New tasks were not started until prior ones were accomplished. In hindsight, a series of parallel activities probably could have been undertaken to accelerate the planning and implementation processes. This could have built greater trust in the local government than may have been achieved thus far.
2. The most engaged stakeholders, who provided both time and energy to this work, are the local nonprofits – especially those serving the immigrant and refugee communities. They served an important role in convening and mobilizing these communities to participate in this process. The nonprofits became trusted messengers for immigrant and refugee communities that city officials may not have been able to access otherwise.
3. Civil discourse was improved during the process and the community dialogues being conducted are proving beneficial. However, it is unclear if the city has accrued any increased level of trust due to the process.



RESOURCES

[Bellevue Centers Communities of Color | City of Bellevue \(bellevuewa.gov\)](https://bellevuewa.gov)

[Pomegranate Center](#)

STATE AND LOCAL PUBLIC FORUM

Camden, SC



The Challenge

City residents are not always able to get answers to questions of community concern during the “public comment” period at a traditional city council meeting. In Camden, a community volunteer group called Concerned Citizens of Kershaw County organized the All Voices Matter forum to address this issue. The first forum was held in October 2023 and repeated in February 2024 and again in May 2024. The goal is communicating answers to complex multi-jurisdictional issues through an “all of government” forum where representatives from all levels of government are present and responding to questions.



The Strategy

Concerned Citizens of Kershaw County is a nongovernmental community-based group with inclusive membership. Their goal is to build a strong community based on deliberative discussion and subsequent action. They have established credibility through prior programs such as Unity Day celebrations in observance of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King’s birthday. Members of this group regularly attend council meetings.

The group organized a series of forums open to all where residents can meet and direct questions to public officials across multiple jurisdictions. Participants include the mayors in Camden, Elgin and Bethune and the chair of the county council, plus the county sheriff, City of Camden police chief and city manager, leadership from the school district and a state legislator.

An independent network news reporter or anchor moderates the program. Participants present questions upon arrival for a 90-minute meeting.

Residents exercised control over the agenda by writing out questions to which they sought answers. The moderator was not controlled by the public leadership. The hosts paid to rent the convening space – no public funds were used in this convening. Questions that could not be answered on the spot were referred to professional staff for follow-up (such as a question about which roadways and streets were under the control of which level of government).

The forum proved to be respectful and well-organized. The forum was directed by the participants, and their questions on public safety, housing, electricity rates and other matters were the focus for the discussion. These programs will continue for the foreseeable future.



“This forum provides a good opportunity for the discussion of complex matters that involve multiple levels of government – city, county and state. I was impressed with the orderliness and civility of the form.”

Mayor Alfred Mae Drakeford

Lessons

1. There is often a single issue or topic or concern that drives extended interest across much of the county that is only discovered when multiple communities are brought together.
2. Bringing multiple levels of government representatives together in a single forum may be complex but the benefit is the comprehensive nature of responses to complex questions.
3. Community leaders learn as much from the questions asked as the residents learn from the answers provided.



RESOURCES

[Concerned Citizens for Kershaw County](#)

BETTER CONVERSATIONS

Oklahoma City, OK



The Challenge

On April 19, 1995, a domestic terrorist attack targeted the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City, killing 168 people, including 19 children, and injuring hundreds more. This act of violence shocked the nation and changed Oklahoma City forever. On the fifth anniversary of the attack, the Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum opened its doors with a mission to teach the impact of violence, inspire hope and encourage civic engagement.

Kari Watkins has led this mission as the museum's president and CEO for the last 25 years, and she has seen the impact of poor civil discourse. She explains that what she “kept seeing were these cross-generational issues,” and older and younger folks talking past each other. By 2019, the Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum began to explore programming that recognized this growing communication gap in society, often characterized by differing perspectives between tech-savvy younger generations and those with extensive life experience. Other related factors included a decreasing ability by individuals to engage in civil discourse on sensitive or controversial topics and increasing polarization in public discussions (both in-person and online).



The Strategy

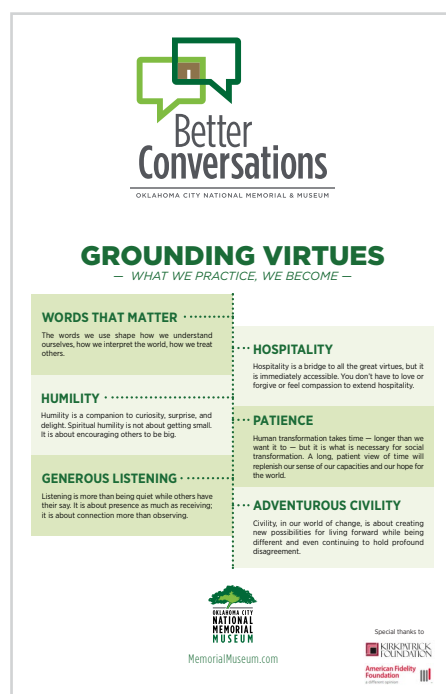
In February 2020, the Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum launched Better Conversations, an initiative to increase cross-generational understanding through intentional dialogue. “The point was to put your phones down, to have this conversation around the table, to create dialogue and bring people together with different points of view,” Watkins explains.

How Better Conversations Works

The museum has developed a range of materials to facilitate these conversations. These include conversation starter cards, a Better Conversations educational poster and a specially designed Back to School Edition deck of cards for classrooms. These resources are designed to be shared with clubs, schools, churches and other organizations interested in hosting discussions.

The project collaborated with Kirsta Tippet, journalist and founder of the podcast On Being. Better Conversations takes On Being’s “Grounding Virtues” as a foundation for conversations, emphasizing principles of respectful dialogue.

The Memorial & Museum hosts an online series to reach a wider audience, with videos available on their website. It also offers regular in-person sessions throughout the year where people can learn skills on how to engage in civil conversations. The project provides specific resources for educators on topics such as the January 6, 2021, ballot certification events at the US Capitol, guidelines for talking to children about difficult events and resources on how to peacefully advocate for change.



Credit: Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum



RESOURCES

[Better Conversations, Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum](#)

CITIZEN ASSEMBLY: THE PETALUMA FAIRGROUNDS

Petaluma, CA



The Challenge

The City of Petaluma, CA, near San Francisco, undertook an experiment in citizen-led democracy to address what had become an intractable problem. The city held a large plot of land called the Petaluma Fairgrounds – 55 acres owned by the city and used by community members. There are two schools located on the property that many children from the community attend. Local businesses and nonprofits also had locations on the land. Most importantly, the land was used to bring together various community members through the numerous events hosted there throughout the year.

For the past 50 years, the city has leased the property to the 4th District Agricultural Association (4DAA/Fairgrounds Board), which manages the property and hosts the region's cornucopia of agriculture programming. The lease expired in December 2023. The city council believed the vision for the Fairground's future should reflect the goals of the community, but no single unifying vision had been achieved by traditional means. The Petaluma Fairgrounds Advisory Panel (PFAP) – a bespoke citizens assembly – was created for this purpose. The city invited Healthy Democracy (healthydemocracy.com) a leading US organization dedicated to designing and implementing deliberative democracy programs to facilitate the initiative.



The Strategy

In March 2023, the city mailed 10,000 letters to Petaluma residents, inviting them to help plan the future of the Fairgrounds. Residents were invited to enter a lottery from which 36 people would be selected to participate in a panel that would broadly represent the diversity of Petaluma. Participants were required to be at least 16 years of age and be a resident. They also were required to commit about 102 hours of in-person meetings or 90 hours of online meetings for two months. Participants were compensated for their time with a lump-sum amount of \$20 per hour totaling \$2,040 for the two months. To reduce the barriers to participation, the city also provided language access, travel stipends and childcare support to the participants.

Nearly 350 people responded. On April 13, 2022, the city hosted a public lottery selection event in which an open-source algorithm selected 36 participants. The participants were selected based on demographics factors representative of the city including gender, race/ethnicity, age, educational attainment, housing status, location of resident, experience of disability, income, language spoken, sexual orientation, political engagement, religious identity and foreign/U.S. born.

The panel met for nearly 90 hours from mid-May to mid-July to learn about the Fairgrounds from a full range of stakeholders, deliberate on positions and possible options, and make recommendations on what the city should do with the fairground property. The city also created subcommittees that allowed the panelist to continue engaging with their work after the presentation of the final report to the city council. The four subcommittees were:

- Evaluation Subcommittee, tasked with organizing a post-panel survey
- Communications and Outreach Subcommittee, responsible for raising awareness about the panel in the community
- Policy Subcommittee, tasked with following up on the post-panel policy outcomes
- Design Subcommittee, which oversaw setting up a charette-style design evening for future citizen engagement

The panelists were paid for an additional 24 hours of service for their engagement in the committees.

Assembly Recommendation on the Fairgrounds

Following the assembly's recommendation, the city assumed management of the fairground property as of January 1, 2023, and has executed agreements with the respective tenants to ensure the transition runs smoothly. According to the city's website, residents will enjoy greater access to the property in the form of parks and open spaces, facilities rentals for the community, bike and pedestrian paths, and a farmers' market. The city has forms on its website that residents can fill out to host events at the location.



Lessons

Based on surveys, the assembly process appears to have transcended the political polarization that fractures many communities and enabled residents to come to agreement on a significant policy challenge even in the face of ideological differences. A sample of panelists' feedback follows:

- 100% agreed or strongly agreed that they better understand the Fairgrounds issue because of participating in the PFAP
- 100% either agreed or strongly agreed that they were exposed to different perspectives through their participation in the PFAP
- 96% said they learned more about government decision-making through the process
- 96% either agreed or strongly agreed that they felt a growing sense of community with the other panelists
- 87% either agreed or strongly agreed that they plan to stay in touch with fellow panelists following their service
- 96% agreed or strongly agreed they were excited to be part of the process
- 83% agreed or strongly agreed that their excitement grew with each session
- 54% agreed or strongly agreed that they have a say in what goes on in their neighborhoods
- 92% agreed or strongly agreed that their input is meaningful and important in local decision-making

Despite this positive feedback, the post-assembly survey comments indicate that participants' political views were not affected by the exposure to diverse opinions. Nonetheless, the majority maintained that the process had a profound impact on them and has exposed them to the complexities of government decision-making, which allowed them to be more empathetic to the process. Further, the data strongly suggested that the panelists came out of the experience with a deepened sense of democratic voice and agency.

This enthusiasm was also shared by city employees who “felt they were part of something really special.” Petaluma City Manager Peggy Flynn stated that the process has shifted her team’s perception of citizen engagement; in her post-project interview, she indicated that “they will never think of public consultation the same way.”



RESOURCES

[Assembling an Assembly Guide](#), Democracy Next

Ehsassi, Marjan, “How Democracy Should Work: Lessons in Learning, Building Cohesion and Community,” Berggruen Institute.

Experiences in Community Engagement

THE PEOPLE'S BUDGET

Philadelphia, PA



The Challenge

In the summer of 2020, during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and a period of heightened tensions between residents and the local government, many Philadelphians called for reallocating city funds to alternative economic and social justice programs. This movement was part of a broader trend across the United States, with citizens demanding a shift in resources from programs such as policing, debt servicing and fossil fuels toward enhancing social services, financial safety nets and renewable energy. The goal was to empower communities most affected by crime, poverty and public health challenges. Simultaneously, concerns arose over proposed cuts to city services, as American Rescue Plan funds had yet to hit the city's coffers. For residents, city budget processes often appear complex and opaque, with limited opportunities to provide feedback and call for changes, highlighting the need for more transparent and inclusive budgeting practices.



The Strategy

The People's Budget was launched in 2020 to address challenging questions surrounding city budgeting. The initiative facilitates creative ways for residents to engage with the budget process by educating them about its workings while channeling their voices back to the city's budget office. Public art installations serve as critical touchpoints for residents to learn about the budget. The effort also helps residents create art and visual representations to show their budget priorities to the city council.

Creating the People's Budget

Now in operation for four years, the People's Budget represents a successful partnership between the city budget office and Mural Arts Philadelphia. The project began as a series of online "teach-ins" during the COVID-19 lockdown. Phoebe Bachman, a local artist who works for Mural Arts Philadelphia, partnered with the city budget office to invite city officials, elected leaders, experts and community leaders to discuss different aspects of the city's budget and demystify the budgeting process. Local artist Jesse Grimes was another strong voice in creating more awareness about the city budget. During the teach-ins, Grimes supported an initiative that came to be called "Stitching the Future." Grimes encouraged participants to make quilt squares depicting their budget priorities. "All these little quilt squares were then made into a larger quilt," Bachman said, mimicking the process by which individual programs become part of an interconnected whole.

In subsequent years, the People's Budget has expanded its creative engagement methods. The project sponsors an artist-in-residency program to recruit diverse local perspectives and ideas. During the budget drafting period (March to June), artists create posters around the city and run games, booths and food stalls; a festival featuring live music and performance art also has been launched. These artistic projects are designed to bring attention to the budget and various pathways for individuals to provide their feedback to the city government.

Bachman and her team also devised an office for the People's Budget out of a retrofitted shipping container. Residents can explore the office outside of City Hall, which provides a tactile space for engagement on the city's budget. Outside, public gardens are housed in planters made of recycled filing cabinets. Inside, residents can voice their feedback on multicolored notecards, stamped with the People's Budget logo and marked with the resident's zip code. During the budget process, these notecards are aggregated and presented to the city council in a report.

For cities that are exploring how to better engage their residents on public budgeting, Bachman stresses that starting with simple exercises like collecting postcards in public spaces (such as libraries) is a meaningful way to get started.



RESOURCES

[The People's Budget, Mural Arts Philadelphia](#)

CITIZEN'S CIVIC ACADEMY

North Richland Hills, TX



The Challenge

City leadership in North Richland Hills recognized the limited numbers of residents that were involved in civic responsibilities such as community boards and commissions. In addition, many residents did not have a basic grasp of the work of the city government, its key functions, its departmental structure, its finances and its general operation. These deficiencies led city leaders to create a new mechanism to help educate and inspire residents to take a more active role in local governance.



The Strategy

In 2012, the Citizens Civic Academy (CCA) was launched. Its purpose is to familiarize citizens with the structure, functions and activities of North Richland Hills city departments, encourage citizens to become involved in their community and enhance their ability to communicate effectively with city officials. Class sessions, delivered by city staff, cover a broad range of city departments, operations and volunteer opportunities. The class size is limited to 20 people. At the conclusion of each class, participants are invited to join one of the city's civic groups to share their knowledge and experiences. Academy graduates have gone on to be part of the planning and zoning commission, the library and park boards and the board responsible for municipal bonds.

Structure

Classes meet over a period of eight weeks. City staff serve as keynote lecturers. Topics covered include:

- A history of the city
- Roles of the City Council and of boards & commissions
- Public Works functions
- Planning & Economic Development strategies
- Public Safety - Police & Fire Departments
- Municipal Court
- Neighborhood Services
- Human Resources
- Finance and Budget
- Parks & Recreation
- Library Services

Eligibility Requirements

Participants must be residents of North Richland Hills; cannot be running for political office during the session; and must attend sessions in person (attendance at six of the eight sessions is required to receive a graduation certificate).

Benefits

- Increase familiarity with the city and its operations
- Engage and converse with local elected officials and city staff
- Gain firsthand experience and exposure to the range of city services, functions, activities and issues
- Promote increased activism by community members
- Provide valuable real-time feedback to the city regarding municipal services
- Create a new pathway for dialogue between residents and the city staff
- Improve relationships and foster trust

Engagement in Practice: Ordinance on Chicken Coops in Residential Areas

Graduates of the Citizens Civic Academy were active on both sides of a recent city debate over zoning rules in North Richland Hills. The issue concerned ownership of live chickens on residential property: in November 2023, following a controversy over a backyard chicken coop that was in violation of the existing zoning ordinance, the conflict was discussed and resolved through active community negotiation and the adoption of a new ordinance. The revised ordinance was a model of compromise and accommodation of the interests of the community while ensuring the well-being of the chickens and addressing neighborhood concerns.

PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

Fenton, MI



The Challenge

Fenton has faced a long-term challenge to revitalize the downtown district. Through a concerted effort over several decades, a corps of volunteers on boards and commissions has been recruited to identify key priority projects downtown and across the community. The volunteer boards have become a critical part of the city's planning and development process and have become more robust in the last 15 years. As a vehicle to help set strategic goals and identify important priorities and opportunities, the boards and commissions are highly engaged.



The Strategy

Decisions about budgetary priorities are shared across several key stakeholder groups. The city council has ultimate authority, with the council advised during the decision-making process by groups such as the Downtown Development Authority (DDA), Local Development Finance Authority (LDFA), sectoral boards, business owners and residents. The Downtown Development Authority was created in 2001. Fifty percent of property taxes collected within the district remain in the district for investment in economic growth. The DDA's \$3-million budget is approved by the city. The LDFA has responsibility for the city's industrial park, collecting revenues from the commercial owners and adding amenities such as sidewalks and streetlights.


Residents make use of the city's boards and commissions to channel important projects or neighborhood improvements into the city's budget process. By way of example, the downtown Beautification Commission is charged with fostering a walkable downtown. The newest innovation implemented from this commission's recommendation is a set of self-watering flower baskets adorning the sidewalks of the downtown. The Arts & Culture Commission helped to create a rotating inventory of public art at 18 locations around the city. Some of the art is publicly owned and some is leased.

The city's Library Board tracked community requests for increased and improved programming for youth. These recommendations were adopted by the city council and included in the budget. The Museum Board, in partnership with the local historical society, is renovating the home of Fenton's founding citizen. The future museum will house memorabilia of the city's history and development.

In addition to these regular channels for public input into the city's budget process, each year the city leadership hosts an open forum budget session for final deliberations in the annual spending plan. This full-day event is part of the city's promise of transparency in financial decision-making.

Costs to the City

The city manager, assistant managers and other city staff serve on all boards and commissions as do the elected councilmembers. These are significant investments in time by city leadership but bring significant rewards through clear communications between residents and city leadership.



“Dialogue helps to mitigate unanticipated consequences. Transparency and shared information with residents allow for community-wide problem solving and increase the credibility of the city leadership.”

Mayor Pro Tem Patricia Lockwood

Globalization of Local Policy: Climate, Conflict and Human Rights

We live in a highly interconnected world and a 24-hour-a-day news cycle. Smartphones allow residents to be plugged in to neighborhood news (e.g., through Nextdoor) and also to national and international events. Those who are passionate about issues – local, national and international – often turn to their municipal governments as an avenue to express their viewpoints.

It's not new for global issues to take center stage at the local level. In the 1980s cities and towns as far apart as Takoma Park, MD and Berkeley, CA passed local "nuclear-free zone" resolutions. Regardless of their impact on international relations and foreign policy, the statement of values from hometowns in America were integral to the national debate.

Sister City programs, catalyzed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1956, have been the backbone of citizen diplomacy and global connectivity – for education, culture, commerce and fellowship – for over 350 U.S. cities and towns connecting to over 1,800 communities abroad. While often thought of as limited to sending high school students, artists and musicians to be immersed in a new culture, American cities with "twins" in conflict zones have pointedly advocated for peaceful resolutions.

In the 21st century, Chicago condemned apartheid in South Africa in 2003. By the end of 2023, 187 cities of all population sizes had signed on to the Global Mayors Covenant for Climate and Energy. American local officials joined leaders in 13,382 other communities representing 1.236 billion people to take a stance on climate issues across the globe.



While issues such as promotion of local products internationally, attracting tourism or foreign investment or luring overseas students to a community are considered valid economic development goals, other global questions tend to require more complicated decision-making by local elected officials.

Local officials are asked to consider matters of war and peace, refugee migration, famine, global human rights and climate change more frequently than in prior decades. There is no evidence of consensus on these topics among local officials. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that efforts to exercise the leadership role as convener and create the opportunity for a community conversation on a global issue are worthy of consideration.

Creating space for a discussion – a discussion not necessarily hosted or organized by the municipality but rather by a knowledgeable unbiased intermediary – can channel the debate back to the community where residents themselves can take ownership. This solution has its risks, but local leaders experience risk regardless of what decision is made.

PROMISING RESOURCES & PRACTICES

Understanding the civic health and civic infrastructure of your community



RESOURCE

Assessment tools to show the state of civil discourse, civic health and local democracy



WHY IS THIS USEFUL?

To improve local democracy, we need to be able to measure it. This can include indicators for voting, volunteerism, membership in neighborhood and school associations, participation in public decision-making and other kinds of civic activities.



TOOLS

Types of assessment tools:

Civic infrastructure reports are based on interviews and desk research. They describe the civic infrastructure of a place, including programs and organizations that are key civic assets, the recent history of initiatives for engaging the public, barriers to and equity in engagement, and information on how people are connected, both in-person and online.

For large cities, US Census-based indices like the **Civic Health Index** measure citizen attitudes about their communities based on how Americans have answered specific questions on the US Census or other federal surveys.

The **Healthy Democracy Ecosystem Map** can be helpful for showing the democracy-strengthening organizations and projects in a community.



EXAMPLES

[Boulder Civic Health Index](#)

[Austin Civic Health Index](#)

[Seattle Civic Health Index](#)

PROMISING RESOURCES & PRACTICES

Understanding the civic health and civic infrastructure of your community



▶ RESOURCE

Survey and rating tools to understand how residents value engagement opportunities and options for improving local democracy



▶ WHY IS THIS USEFUL?

It is important to understand how residents view public meetings and other opportunities to engage. How do people rate their communities: Do they feel well informed and connected? Do they think they have a meaningful say in public decisions? Do they feel their volunteerism and service are supported and honored?



▶ TOOLS

Digital rating systems like the [Civic Engagement Scorecard](#)

The [Civic Index](#), a diagnostic tool to help people understand and improve their civic infrastructure

Public opinion research questions like those in the [Yankelovich Democracy Monitor](#)



▶ EXAMPLES

Civic Engagement Scorecard results from public meetings in Mesa, AZ

[Civic Index](#) report from Franklin, TN

PROMISING RESOURCES & PRACTICES

Understanding the civic health and civic infrastructure of your community



▶ RESOURCE

Strategies for assessing, improving and connecting with hyperlocal online networks and other common components of civic life online



▶ WHY IS THIS USEFUL?

Local and neighborhood online networks are already an important asset for civic health, and they have a great deal more untapped potential. Most American households belong to an online network that focuses on where they live: either an email list, a Facebook group page, a Nextdoor neighborhood or some other customized platform. These online spaces combine the convenience and scalability of a digital tool with the many benefits of face-to-face relationships.



▶ TOOLS

Considerations:

Many local online networks function mainly as webs for information-sharing (“Does anyone know a good plumber?” “When is the school board meeting?” “Has anyone seen my lost cat?”).

Some have been criticized for enabling racial profiling (when residents report people on their street as “suspicious” when they simply look different from other residents).

One of the key differences between different online networks is how they are moderated: some have trained human moderators while others use unmoderated or technologically moderated discussion threads.



▶ EXAMPLES

[Front Porch Forum](#) in Vermont and parts of New York state

[PlaceSpeak](#) in many Canadian and a number of US communities

[Common Agency](#) in Wisconsin cities

PROMISING RESOURCES & PRACTICES

Finding allies and making connections to reach large, diverse numbers of people



RESOURCE

Strategies for forming and sustaining local cross-sector leadership groups



WHY IS THIS USEFUL?

Improving civil discourse should be a cross-sector, community-wide priority. Elected officials, nonprofit leaders, grassroots organizers, business leaders, school leaders, faith leaders, academics and other community members all have roles to play. This work should be led by diverse sets of people who are tasked with developing recommendations, overseeing implementation and measuring impacts.



TOOLS

Types of bodies:

[Engagement commissions](#) made up of appointed local leaders that can play a number of roles: measuring the effectiveness of engagement efforts, issuing an annual report on civic health, advocating for engagement efforts and encouraging communication between organizations trying to engage the public.

City charter commissions that review the charter and recommend ways to revise the charter to better support public engagement and civic health. See the 9th edition of the [Model City Charter](#) (2021).

Strategic planning commissions

Best practices:

- Recruit for diversity
 - Provide a clear mandate
 - Emphasize leaders' role in engaging their constituents, not just representing them
 - Encourage commissions to measure and report progress
-



EXAMPLES

[Clear Vision Eau Claire](#), in Eau Claire, WI, is an example of a visioning process and engagement commission.

[Decatur Next](#), in Decatur, GA, is a recurring visioning process and support for engagement.

PROMISING RESOURCES & PRACTICES

Finding allies and making connections to reach large, diverse numbers of people



RESOURCE

Recruitment and communication strategies for reaching large, diverse numbers of people



WHY IS THIS USEFUL?

Strengthening civil discourse requires recruitment. Most strategies are going to be more successful if they involve large numbers of participants. Recruitment is particularly important for bringing people to the table whose voices, for one reason or another, simply aren't being heard. "Going where the people are" and holding discussions in the places where they already gather (online spaces as well as in-person ones) are often excellent steps in this direction, but even that isn't always sufficient. People participate in things because they are asked to do so by someone they know and trust, and so the key to recruitment is tapping into that web of existing, trusting relationships in the community.



TOOLS

Key strategies:

A stakeholder mapping exercise can show which people and organizations are trusted by which groups and populations in the community.

A timeline exercise can help uncover past incidents, divisions or unsuccessful engagement efforts that help explain why people don't want to participate.

Set goals for how many people you are trying to attract and identify which sets of people are important but may be particularly difficult to recruit.



Digital tools that help manage relational organizing have been used extensively on political campaigns – they can also be useful for outreach around civic activities.

EXAMPLES

The City of Boulder's [Community Connectors](#) program has established a network of people who are trusted in their neighborhoods and can help drive turnout for projects and events.

[CivicLex](#) is an organization in Lexington, KY, that works with public institutions to organize, coordinate and measure community engagement.

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► RESOURCE

Recommendations for creating or upgrading citizen academies



► WHY IS THIS USEFUL?

Citizen academies are training programs organized by local governments (and other institutions) that give residents a better understanding of how city councils, police departments, planning departments and other city functions operate. They can be upgraded by shifting the emphasis from simply “how government works” to including at least some discussion with participants about “how government and citizens could work together better.”



► TOOLS

Other potential components to consider:

A focus on digital tools and strategies, particularly ones that help citizens and governments share information, gather input and gauge citizen attitudes

Providing opportunities for citizens and city employees to go through the training together, not just as trainers and trainees but as co-learners

Including people of different generations in the same training program



► EXAMPLES

[Citizen's Civic Academy](#) in North Richland Hills, TX

The City of Seattle's [People's Academy for Community Engagement](#)

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► RESOURCE

Structures and strategies for supporting civic education and youth civic leadership



► WHY IS THIS USEFUL?

In many places, educators and officials are reinforcing the need to expand civic education and support civic learning. A wide variety of projects, organized by schools, universities, nonprofit organizations and elected officials, aims to give young people the knowledge and skills they need to be productive citizens and leaders. Some of these efforts focus on increasing students' understanding of our government and political systems; others involve young people in assessing and solving local problems; and many more provide opportunities for service and volunteerism.



► TOOLS

Some challenges facing civic educators (and young people themselves):

The need to better define what kinds of knowledge and skills today's citizens require, especially given the technological and societal changes we face, so that civic education opportunities can adequately prepare people

A comparative lack of opportunities for people to practice the skills and use the knowledge they gain through civic education

The need for more ways to measure progress – both of individuals and communities – in gaining, using and benefiting from civic education



► EXAMPLES

[Youth councils](#) have been instituted in many communities to help support and capitalize on youth leadership.

[Young Voices](#) is an organization focused on empowering youth in Rhode Island. Through programming, young people are coached on policy analysis, public speaking and community organizing, and receive other supports to help become effective advocates in their community.

The [Kentucky Student Voice Team](#) works with Kentucky schools and communities as education research, policy and storytelling partners.

PROMISING RESOURCES & PRACTICES

Finding allies and making connections to reach large, diverse numbers of people



► RESOURCE

Trainings and tools to help neighborhood associations, parent groups, service clubs, boards and commissions, and other grassroots groups sustain and grow their membership



► WHY IS THIS USEFUL?

The “ground floor of democracy” includes neighborhood and homeowner associations, parent associations and other school- or university-based groups, service clubs, boards and commissions, and other grassroots groups. These kinds of groups have the potential to offer highly accessible, meaningful civic opportunities to a wide range of people. In some cases they are reaching this potential, but in other instances grassroots civic groups need more skills and support to engage, sustain and grow their constituencies.



► TOOLS

Grassroots civic groups [can benefit](#) from:

Workshops and trainings that focus on some of the other tools and strategies described in this table

Bringing people who belong to local online networks together for in-person events, and encouraging in-person event participants to join local digital networks

Mini-grant programs that provide financial support for neighborhood projects

Strategies and tools for measuring participant satisfaction

Stronger ties with public institutions, such as local governments and school systems, and clearer expectations about the roles that grassroots groups can play in public decision-making



► EXAMPLES

The [Neighborhood Matching Grants](#) program in Charlotte, NC, engages community members in volunteer service around their neighborhoods and addresses important neighborhood small-scale needs like public safety, beautification and signage.

In Atlanta, the Center for Civic Innovation has helped redesign the city’s [neighborhood-based planning](#) process.

By creating a [system of “block clubs,”](#) the Detroit Department of Neighborhoods is promoting neighborhood representation in local government and supporting collaboration between residents and city officials.

PROMISING RESOURCES & PRACTICES

Interacting with citizens in civil, productive, and meaningful ways



► RESOURCE

Deliberative discussions – processes in which small groups of people (8-10) meet in-person or virtually in a way that helps them connect, learn and act together



► WHY IS THIS USEFUL?

Deliberative discussions, especially if they happen in large numbers, can provide sound input to policy-makers, encourage behavioral changes in a population and galvanize volunteers to solve local problems.



► TOOLS

To organize a deliberative process:

Recruit large and diverse numbers of people

Provide a handout or guide that includes information on the issue being addressed, different policy options and discussion questions

Use a sequence that starts with people talking about why they came, and then helps them learn together and develop recommendations and actions

Provide a facilitator who helps the group set ground rules, manage its time and use the handout or guide



► EXAMPLES

[Portsmouth Listens](#) in Portsmouth, NH, has been facilitating small-group discussions for 20 years.

The [Better Together](#) process in Decatur, GA, building on [a long history](#) of successful engagement, allows people to deliberate on a range of issues.

[Better Conversations](#) – Oklahoma City

PROMISING RESOURCES & PRACTICES

Interacting with citizens in civil, productive, and meaningful ways



► RESOURCE

Digital tools for facilitating, supporting, aggregating or informing civil discourse



► WHY IS THIS USEFUL?

There is a huge array of digital tools for engaging citizens, for many different goals and scenarios. These tools allow leaders to provide and receive information, aggregate and summarize input, tap into the capacity of residents to report on basic problems like potholes or graffiti, allow a high degree of transparency and connect residents to one another. They can do most of these things instantaneously and at high scale.



► TOOLS

See the [Civic Tech Field Guide](#) for a full range of digital tools for strengthening civil discourse and civic health. Some representative tools include:

- For crowdsourcing ideas: AllOurIdeas
 - For gathering feedback on problems and services: SeeClickFix
 - For crowdfunding: ioby
 - For illustrating and voting on options: Ethelo
 - For finding common ground in large groups: Pol.is
 - When using digital tools, take into account:
 - Persistence of digital divides in access, skill and comfort level
 - Concerns about how personal data is used
 - The need to recruit people to use tools (just like recruiting for in-person meetings)
 - Next-generation of AI-fueled tools and challenges
-



► EXAMPLES

The [City of Lakewood](#), CO, has used the tech platforms Lakewood Together and Lakewood Speaks to promote transparency, innovation and community involvement.

Thrive305, an initiative of Miami-Dade County, kicked off with a [countywide survey](#) answered by over 26,400 residents, followed by a series of large-scale discussions to collect ideas and planning workshops to convert those ideas into tangible government actions.

In [Bowling Green, KY](#), the local newspaper used an online tool called Polis to find areas of consensus on divisive issues.

PROMISING RESOURCES & PRACTICES

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▶ RESOURCE

Hybrid strategies that combine digital tools and in-person experiences



▶ WHY IS THIS USEFUL?

Some engagement strategies incorporate digital tools in an in-person process or experience. Participants meet face-to-face, but they use their phones or other devices to get information, discussion questions, polling questions, opportunities to get more involved and other resources. When participants enter their answers, the online tools can instantly show them how all the other respondents answered the same question. These kinds of strategies can be synchronous (they allow people meeting at the same time to participate electronically as well as face-to-face) or asynchronous (people use the digital tool to meet wherever and whenever they want).



▶ TOOLS

Types of hybrid strategies:

Real-time polling tools like [Mentimeter](#) that give people a chance to answer questions or give comments during an in-person meeting

Texting-based strategies like Text Talk Act that use a texting platform to send discussion and polling questions to participants

Interactive Voice Response systems that allow users to dial into a number and use the touch-tone keypad to answer questions and provide feedback on given ideas



▶ EXAMPLES

During the National Dialogue on Mental Health, a coalition of nonprofit organizations and the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) engaged over 50,000 people, many of them young people, in text-enabled, in-person deliberation on mental health issues. The process helped shape the next two years of funding decisions made by SAMHSA.

The City of [Austin, TX](#), has used digital tools to connect with people who watch city council meetings on public access television.

PROMISING RESOURCES & PRACTICES

Interacting with citizens in civil, productive, and meaningful ways



▶ RESOURCE

Survey panels that build and sustain a representative sample of residents willing to weigh in on key questions and issues



▶ WHY IS THIS USEFUL?

Most surveys conducted by local government fall short: it is extremely labor-intensive to reach a wide range of respondents, and they usually still don't achieve a truly representative sample of the population. In survey panels, people sign up to receive regular surveys on a variety of issues and questions posed by local officials. Because it is an ongoing effort, not a one-off survey, the sample of participants can become much larger and more diverse over time. This ongoing relationship can also help leaders create a positive “feedback loop” by reporting back to participants on how their input was used in decision-making.



▶ TOOLS

Considerations:

It makes sense for different public institutions (local government, school system, university) to partner on launching and maintaining survey panels, and jointly benefiting from them.

Survey panels can be overseen by engagement commissions (with members representing the different institutions).

Survey panels are an ideal complement to citizens assemblies and other more intensive



▶ EXAMPLES

BeHeard Philly, one of the first large-scale survey panels, used regular surveys to engage residents of Philadelphia on issues and policies that affect them. Available by phone, web or SMS, the panel grew to include a diverse group of over 10,000 Philadelphians, recruited across all city ZIP codes via street teams, transit advertising and community events.

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RESOURCE

New formats for official public meetings



WHY IS THIS USEFUL?

Innovative engagement strategies have rarely been incorporated in the [official public meetings](#) of city councils, school boards, planning commissions, state agencies and other decision-making bodies. The vast majority of those official meetings continue to use the same format they have for decades: participants are allowed three minutes at the microphone to address the officials, on any topic they choose, with almost no interaction between citizens, officials or staff. These meetings produce frustration on the part of both citizens and officials and seem to erode public trust in government.



TOOLS

Considerations:

[Open meetings laws](#) often seem like an impediment to innovation, but in most states, they do allow positive changes in the format of public meetings.

Simply changing the format of meetings may not be sufficient; officials should engage residents before and after meetings, online and off, in ways that gather productive input and encourage more people to attend.

Giving people a chance to rate the meetings can help communities measure progress as they make improvements and may help encourage change.

Updating the laws and ordinances that govern public meetings, using templates like the Model City Charter, can provide a stronger legal framework.



EXAMPLES

The [Community and Council Forum](#) is a new format for council study sessions in Boulder, CO.

See the State and Local Public Forum, Camden, SC.

PROMISING RESOURCES & PRACTICES

Interacting with citizens in civil, productive, and meaningful ways



▶ RESOURCE

Sortitional processes in which a randomly selected, demographically representative group (usually 30-100 people) comes together to learn about, deliberate on and make recommendations about an important public issue



▶ WHY IS THIS USEFUL?

Because the group is carefully assembled to represent the community in terms of age, gender, race, language, political affiliation and other demographics, and because the participants learn so much through the process, the assembly can give leaders a sense of what an informed public actually thinks and wants on a given issue. Participants hear balanced testimony on the issue from issue experts and those with lived experience and can also conduct surveys or seek comments from other citizens. The assembly produces a final report along with actionable proposals. The government body commits to following up with the participants and community within a reasonable time frame.



▶ TOOLS

Types:

- Citizen assemblies
- Citizen juries
- Civic lottery

Considerations:

In most cases, a government body such as a city council calls for and supports the process.

These are very intensive processes (the group may meet from between 4 and 20 days in total) and they work best when supported by other strategies that allow much larger numbers of people to learn about, give input to and follow the recommendations of the assembly.



▶ EXAMPLES

See Citizen Assembly: The Petaluma Fairgrounds

The State of Oregon has used [Citizens' Initiative Reviews](#), a randomly selected representative group of voters who thoroughly and fairly evaluate ballot measures, to provide voters with essential objective information they need to vote.

The [Pierce County Rural Climate Dialogue](#) was an online citizen's jury focused on making recommendations of actions to address impacts of climate change on local public health as well as on disaster and emergency management in Pierce County, WA.

PROMISING RESOURCES & PRACTICES

Interacting with citizens in civil, productive, and meaningful ways



► RESOURCE

Participatory budgeting (PB), a process in which community members decide how to spend part of a public budget



► WHY IS THIS USEFUL?

PB can harness creativity, leverage volunteer efforts and help leaders understand what residents want. Citizens generate and refine ideas for how to spend the funds, often working in teams that connect with experts and staff, and then there is a vote where everyone in the community can prioritize the ideas and allocate the money. The process can overcome the suspicion or mistrust of the community because it puts actual money on the table.



► TOOLS

Considerations:

PB was originally a face-to-face process but has also been conducted online or as a hybrid strategy.

Some PB processes are focused on neighborhoods or council districts, while others (particularly in Latin America) have a second tier in which neighborhood participants are selected to serve in a metro-wide process to advise the overall city budget.



► EXAMPLES

[The People's Budget](#) - Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

PROMISING RESOURCES & PRACTICES

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▶ RESOURCE

Ongoing civic opportunities centered around food and discussion



▶ WHY IS THIS USEFUL?

Some forms of engagement are successful and sustainable because people find them convenient and fun. They also serve to circulate information, reduce conflict and build connections among residents and between citizens and government.



▶ TOOLS

Common ingredients:

A simple format for discussion over a meal (in some cases, participants get their choice of topics and pick a table based on what they want to discuss; in others, everyone gets the same set of discussion questions on the same topic).

Locations and an atmosphere that make it comfortable for people to bring their kids.

Events that recur – some of the more successful examples are weekly – so that people know what to expect and participation grows over time.

Intentional efforts to recruit a wide variety of people to participate

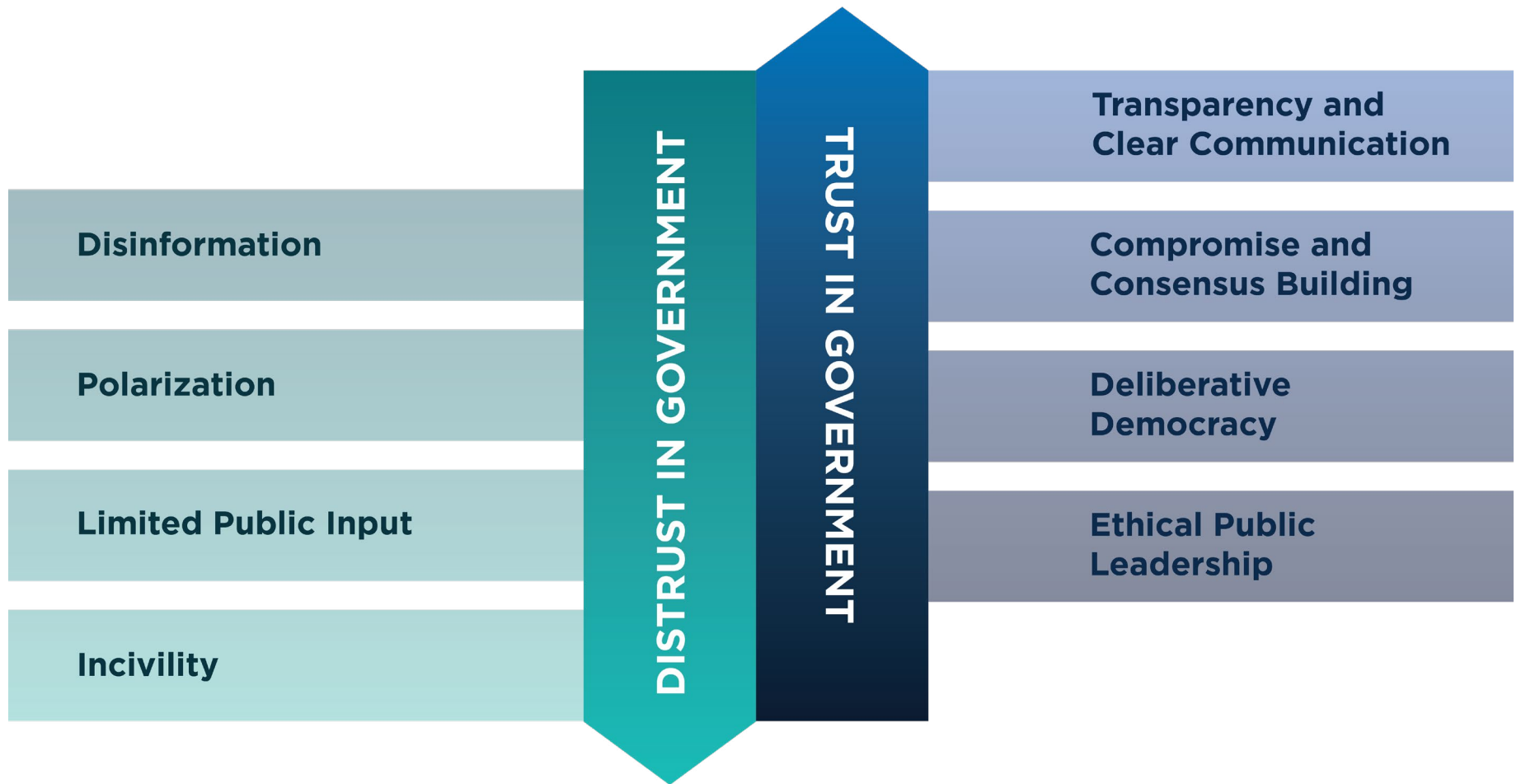


▶ EXAMPLES

[On the Table](#), an initiative in Chicago that brought people together to discuss public issues over dinner, engaged over 55,000 people and expanded to ten other cities before the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the work.

[Create Buckhannon](#), a community organization in Buckhannon, WV, has held a weekly lunch almost every Thursday since 2009. The group has helped citizens plan and establish a new farmer's market and new bike trails.

The Jane Addams School for Democracy, a partnership between the University of Minnesota and the Westside neighborhood of St. Paul, involved 50-200 people every month in “neighborhood learning circles” and cultural exchanges, in four languages, over a period of almost 20 years.



Disinformation

Polarization

Limited Public Input

Incivility

DISTRUST IN GOVERNMENT

TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

**Transparency and
Clear Communication**

**Compromise and
Consensus Building**

**Deliberative
Democracy**

**Ethical Public
Leadership**

CONCLUSION

The responsibilities of local office are often daunting. However, leaders at the municipal level continue to step up and bring all their skills and aspirations for their hometowns to the task of governing. The challenges posed by disinformation, polarization and even violence are not wholly new although the level of intensity today is heightened.

In the face of these challenges the virtues of persistence, integrity, transparency and humanity remain the most potent. Local officials lead by example, and the resources and partners described in this report can provide support. The actions of mayors, councilmembers and city staff can model openness, tolerance, respect, conciliation and collaboration. In doing so, these local leaders set the community standard for behavior in decisions about the present and future of the place they call home.

Each courteous and respectful act and every instance of openness and collaboration with all stakeholders represents the first steps in a virtuous cycle of better conversations and increasing mutual trust. Municipal leaders can kick-start into perpetual motion this process of deliberative democracy and community engagement and trust building.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Bridging Divides Initiative – understanding the threats against local officials, <https://bridgingdivides.princeton.edu/>

Citizen Connect – portal to civic action, <https://citizenconnect.us/find-common-ground/>

One America Movement – faith-based groups to depolarize political dialogue, <https://oneamericamovement.org/>

Sustained Dialogue Institute – training institute for transformative relationships, <https://sustaineddialogue.org/>

Weave Community - Aspen Institute – support for local “trust brokers”, <https://community.weavers.org/>

