

Creating a Comprehensive Local Democracy Strategy

**ICMA conference, Tampa, FL
October 28th, 2025**

**Wifi access:
ICMA2025
MissionSquare**



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City of Decatur, GA**

The National Civic League: A long history of supporting civic health

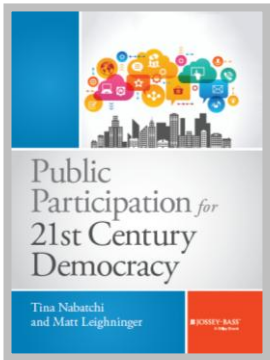


Founded in 1894 by Teddy Roosevelt, Louis Brandeis, Frederick Law Olmsted, and Mary Munford, NCL established the Model City Charter, city manager form of government, and other reforms to fight corruption, end patronage, and advance public health.

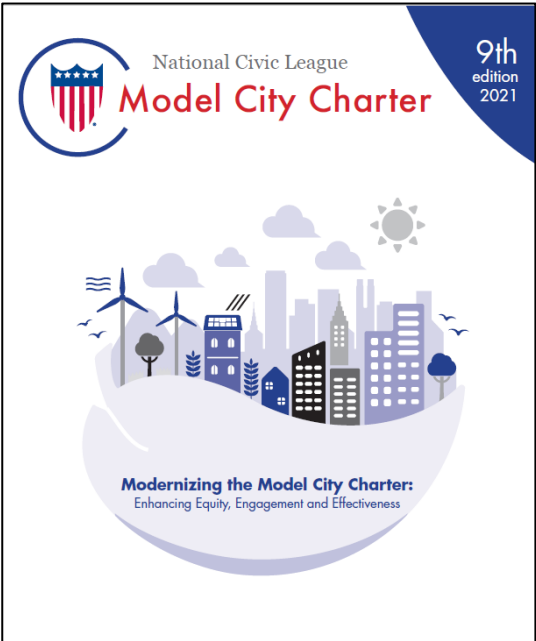
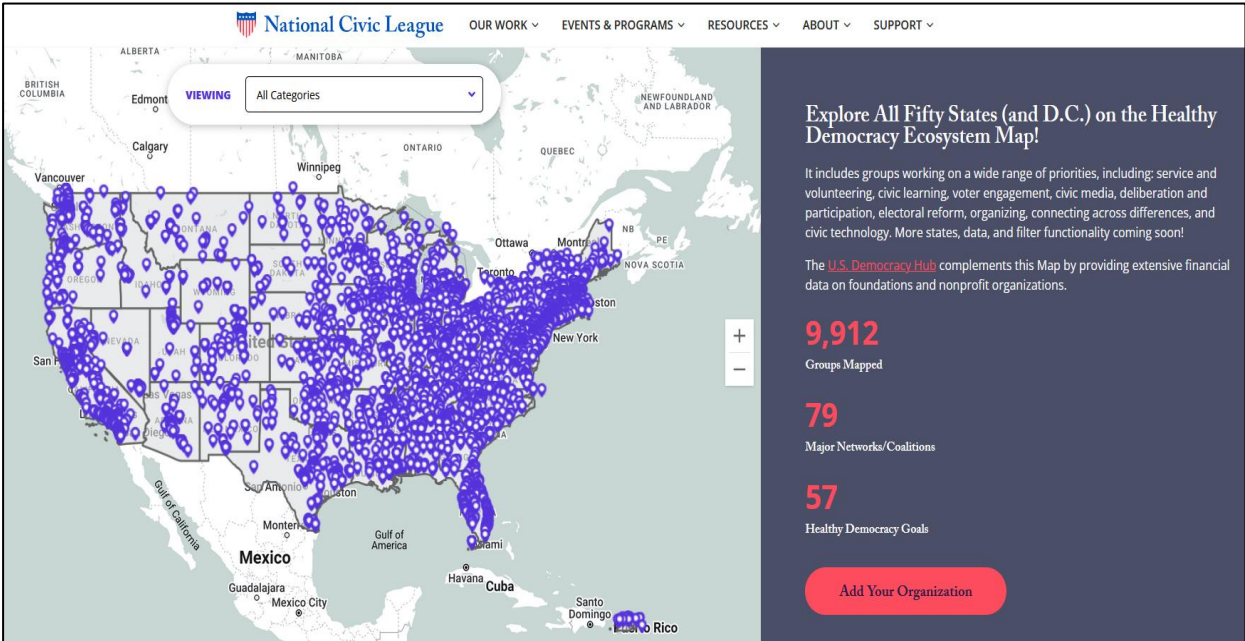
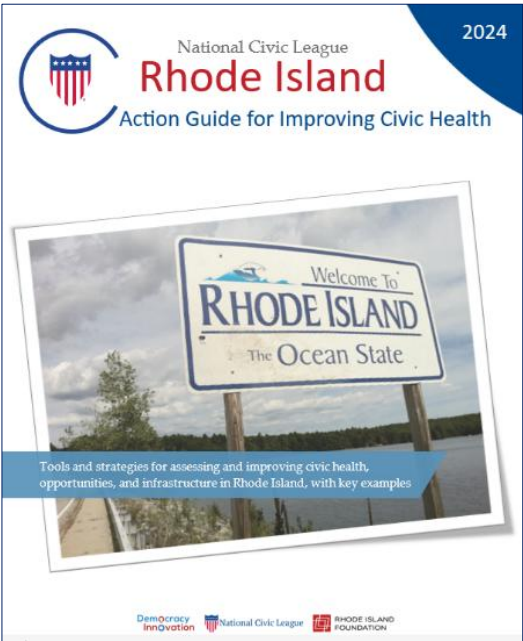


The mission of the National Civic League is to advance inclusive civic engagement and promote innovations in democracy to make decision-making more participatory, equitable, and effective.

NCL: What are the innovations we need today?



The Civic League works with communities to improve public meetings, measure civic engagement, and strengthen civic infrastructure. Nationally, we track and support democracy-building work, as illustrated on the Healthy Democracy Map.



Why does local democracy matter? (part 1)

Stronger connections among residents, and between citizens and institutions, makes people:

- Physically healthier
- More successful economically
- Kids do better in school
- More prepared for natural disasters



Why does local democracy matter? (part 2)

When people have meaningful roles in public decision-making, they produce policies/decisions that:

- Represent what people want
- Are more informed by local experiences and conditions
- Enjoy broader public support
- In some cases, are accompanied by other changes made by citizens



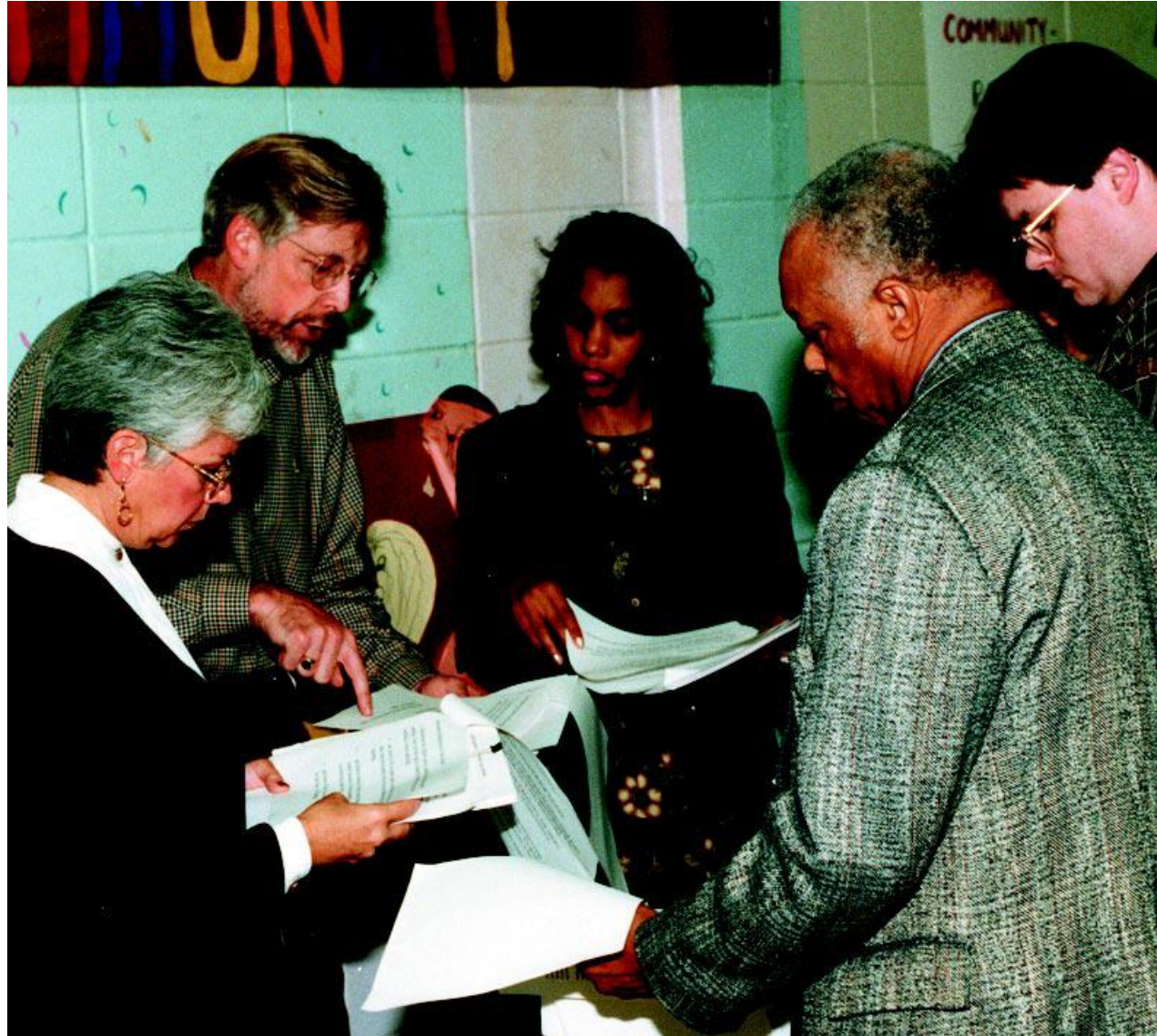
Why does local democracy matter? (part 3)

When people have meaningful roles in public problem-solving, they produce solutions that:

- Rely on volunteerism and citizen capacity
- Rely on volunteerism in collaboration with government
- Are creative
- Get people involved who don't want to participate in decision-making



1998: The Decatur Round Tables



Deliberative discussions

- Groups of 4-8, randomly sorted
- Facilitators
- Group agrees to ground rules
- No more than one elected official per group
- Process for summarizing/sharing ideas (do it digitally – like an online polling or texting-based platform)



Decatur's Better Together Community Action Plan



Digital engagement

General purpose	Some representative examples
Crowdsourcing and ideation	AllOurIdeas; MindMixer; IdeaScale
Gathering feedback on problems and services	SeeClickFix; FixMyStreet; PublicStuff
Crowdfunding	Kickstarter; ioby
Petitions	Change.org
Games	@stake; Community PlanIt; Civic IDEA
Mapping and wikis	LocalWiki; OpenStreetMap
Illustrating options and voting on them	Metroquest; Ethelo
Hyperlocal community-building	Nextdoor; Front Porch Forum
Finding common ground in large groups	Pol.is
Polling	Mentimeter

Better public meetings

Most official public meetings (city council, school board, etc.) are frustrating, inequitable, and inefficient. Public is angry or absent; less trust between residents, government.

Options for improving them:

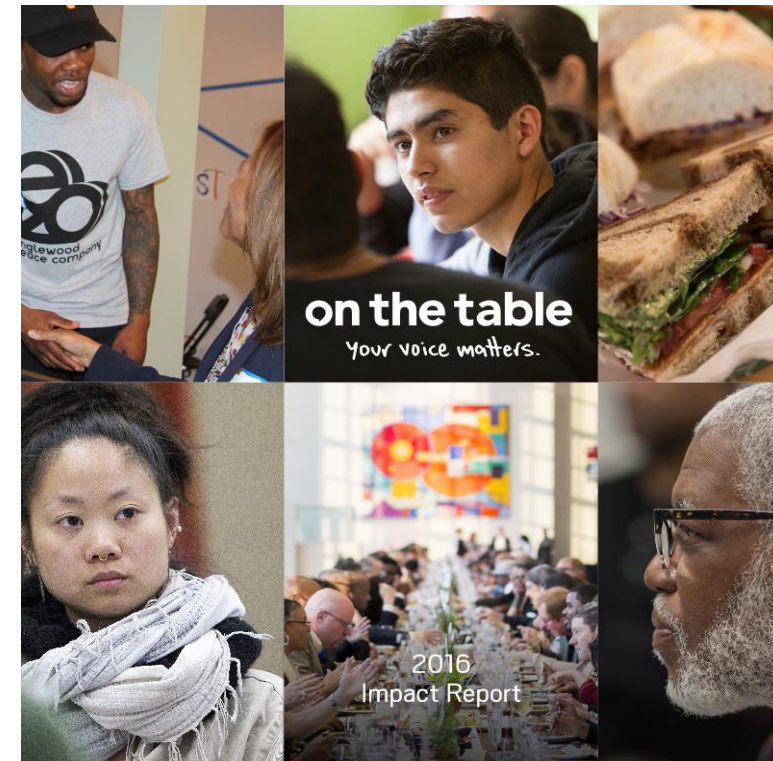
- New procedures for advance notice and comment on agenda
- New procedures for bringing input from community organizations
- Changes in format from two-minutes-at-mic public comment period to small-group discussion, digital polling, conflict resolution avenues, etc.



Social engagement

Regular events that are:

- Convenient
- Fun
- Informed
- Kid-friendly
- Trust-building
- Focused on food
- Include some opportunity for learning, gathering public input

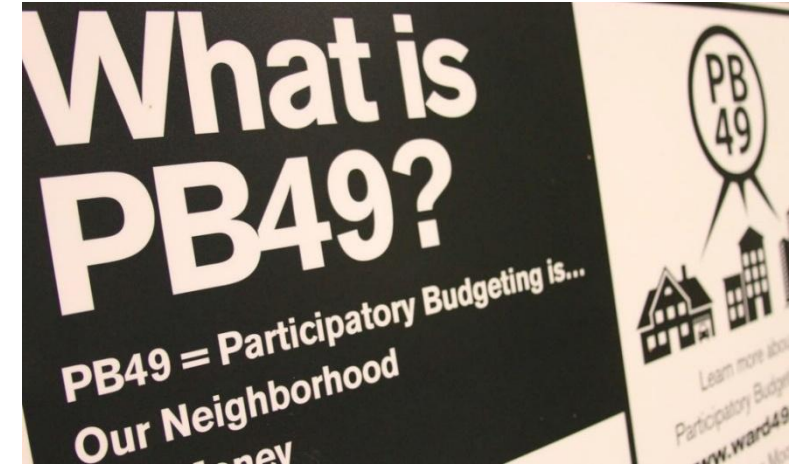


Decatur Dinners



Participatory Budgeting

- Money that citizens decide how to spend
- A structured process – citizens brainstorm, research, and develop proposals, working with gov't officials, staff (the thick part)
- Citizens vote on proposals (the thin part)
- Can have multiple levels – city, region, state

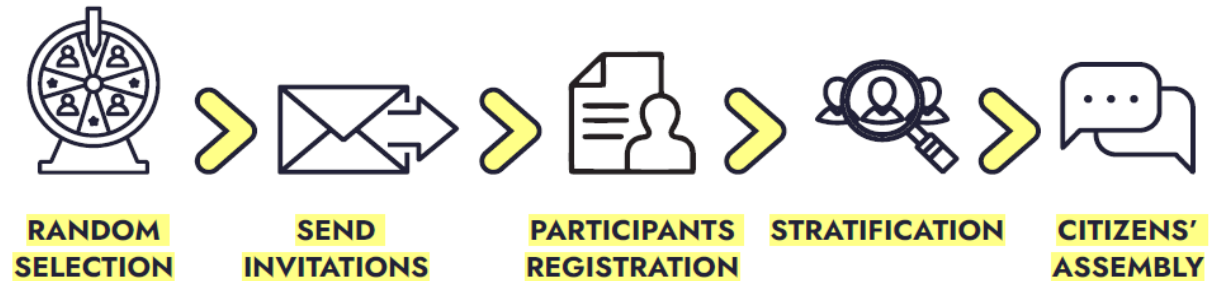


Touch a Truck and Touch a Budget



Civic assemblies

- 20-50 randomly selected people
- Meet 3-10 days over several months
- Hear testimony, learn together
- Issue recommendations
- Officials pledge to consider recommendations

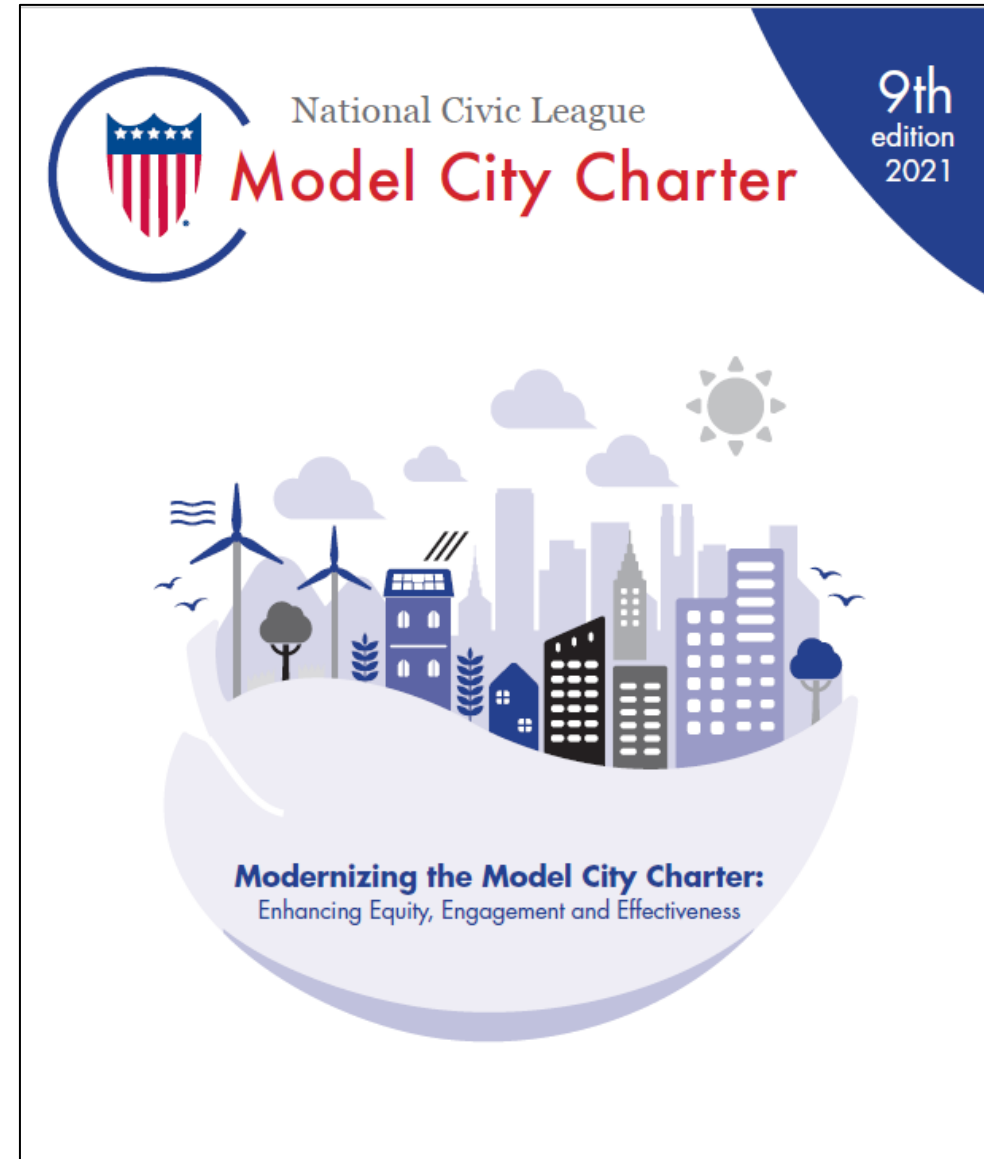


How to improve democracy through city charter revision?

Questions to tackle:

- Who should be in charge of engagement?
- How to build in engagement on the biggest issues?
- How to support engagement by neighborhood, youth, community groups?
- How should official public meetings work?
- How are you going to measure success?

Some answers go in charter – some shouldn't!



Decatur City Charter Revision

What is a Civic Lottery: Decatur is the First to Use One in a Charter Commission Selection Process

- A Civic Lottery is a process for selecting members of the public to serve on a public body or process.
- How it works:
 1. Publicly announce the process (website/social media) and send letters or postcards via mail to households: **7,000 were sent to Decatur residents**
 2. Create a demographic profile of the community that you want to be reflected on your panel or commission: **we used gender, age, district, race/ethnicity, and homeowner/renter**
 3. Open a digital registration for sign-up and collect demographic information: **125 people responded with complete information**
 4. Draw a lot, or panel, randomly based on key demographics: **10 people were selected**
 5. Invite selected residents to serve

How to support neighborhood, youth, community groups (the ground floor of democracy)

Some options:

- Neighborhood council system – give councils specific roles on planning and budgeting issues
- Annual citizen academy process
- Youth council that interacts regularly with city council, manager
- Non-voting youth representatives on city council
- Workshops and how-to materials for neighborhood and community leaders on how to engage residents
- Hybrid process supporting deliberation and gathering input from community groups



Decatur 101



Decatur Youth Council





What are your residents thinking about local democracy?

SEPTEMBER 30, 2025 | ANNA CORNING

Disconnected but Hopeful: What a New Survey Reveals About Civic Life in America

NEWSLETTER

A new national survey finds that while many Americans feel left out of local decision-making and disconnected from their neighbors, they remain eager for better ways to participate. The findings reveal a mix of frustration, and hope about the state of civic life today.

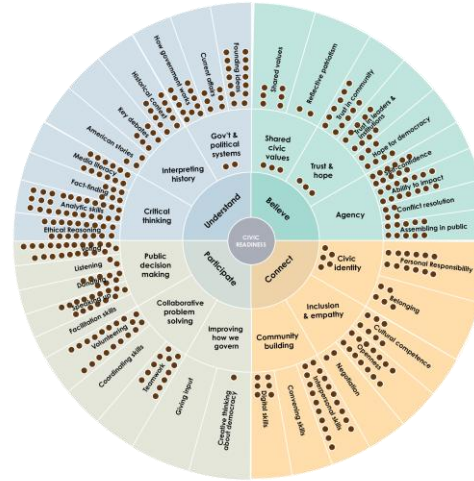
The community survey is still live — take a few minutes to [share your thoughts on local involvement](#) and the civic innovation tools that could help make participation easier and more meaningful.

The survey, a collaboration between the National Civic League and ActiVote, a voter information and democracy app established in 2017, offers a snap shot of how residents experience and imagine civic participation today.

How are you going to measure local democracy?

Some options:

- Ratings process for all official public meetings
- Annual reports produced by body governing engagement
- Regularly occurring audit process by an external researcher



We want to hear from you!

Please rate your experience at this evening's session

An easy online scorecard is available for all meetings from Sept. 7 through Dec. 7, 2023 for you to share your feedback. You may complete the form once for each meeting you attend (whether in-person or online) over the next three months.

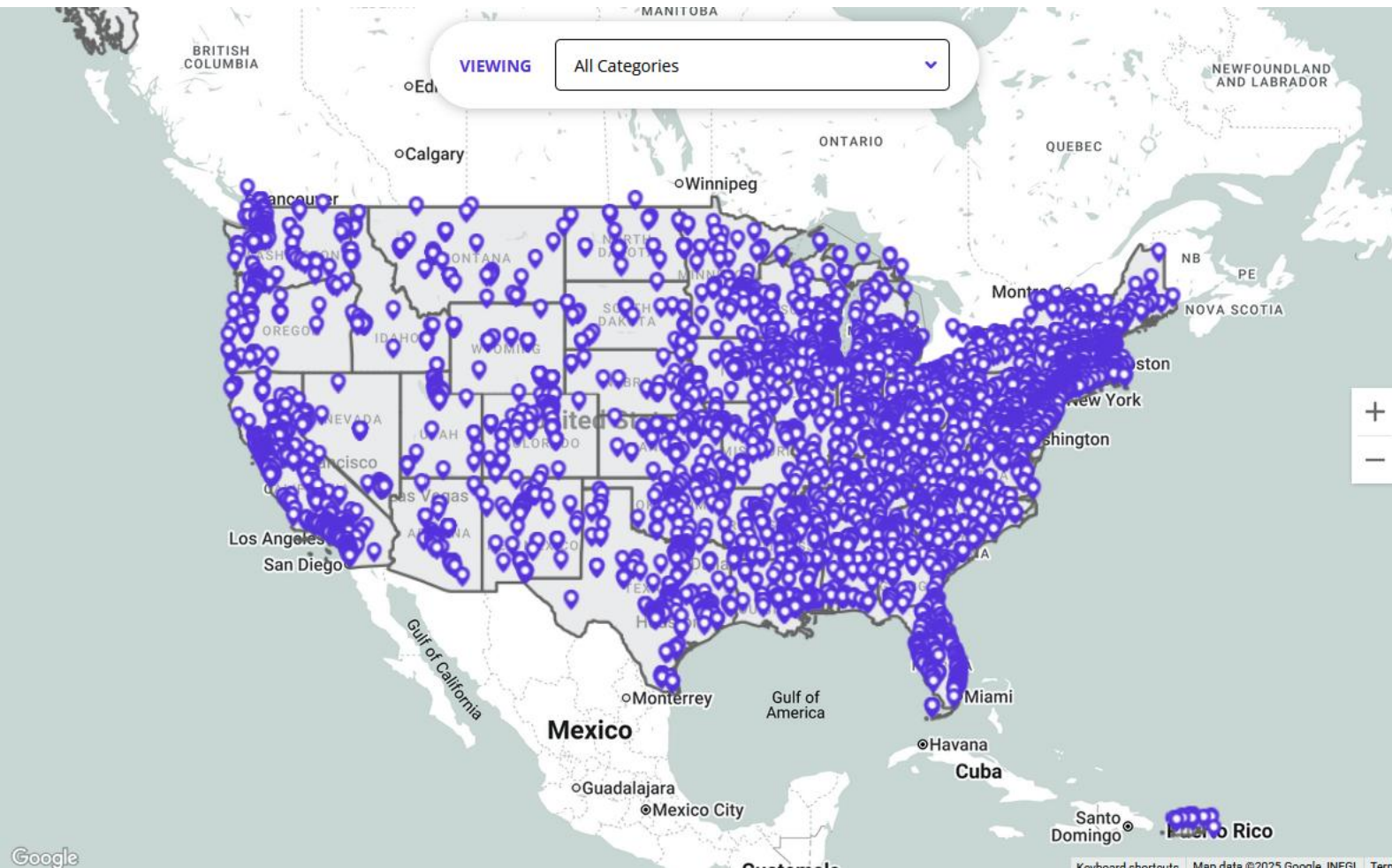
Use the QR code above or this link to access the scorecard:
<http://bldr.fyi/better-meetings>

Making Boulder City Council Meetings Better

The City of Boulder is teaming with the Democracy Innovations for Better Public Meetings Project, in partnership with the National Civic League, to try ways that could make City Council meetings more engaging and satisfying for all.

There are many potential allies for improving local democracy

www.healthydemocracymap.org



Explore All Fifty States (and D.C.) on the Healthy Democracy Ecosystem Map!

It includes groups working on a wide range of priorities, including: service and volunteering, civic learning, voter engagement, civic media, deliberation and participation, electoral reform, organizing, connecting across differences, and civic technology. More states, data, and filter functionality coming soon!

The [U.S. Democracy Hub](#) complements this Map by providing extensive financial data on foundations and nonprofit organizations.

11,356

Groups Mapped

79

Major Networks/Coalitions

57

Healthy Democracy Goals

[Add Your Organization](#)

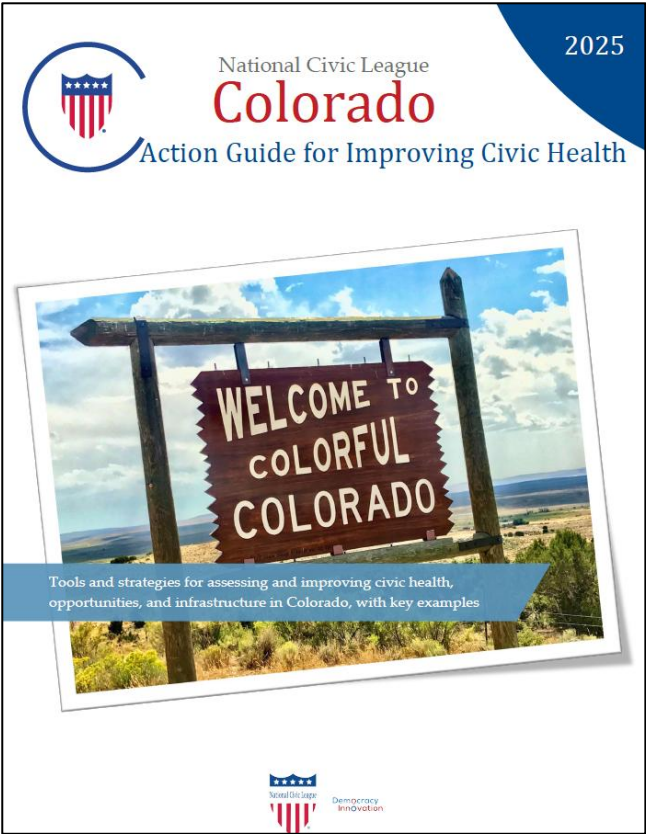
Decatur Community Asset Database

Name	OrganizationType	ContactFirst	ContactLast	State	Zip	Phone	Email
335 West Ponce Condo Association	Neighborhood Group	Kathie	Gannon				kgannon112@comcast.net
Academe of the Oaks	Educational	Eva	Handschin	GA		30030 404 405 2173	evah@academeatlanta.org
Agnes Scott College	Educational	Demetrice	Williams	GA		30030 404 471 6035	dwilliams@agnesscott.edu
Ahimsa House	Civic Group	Maya	Gupta			404 496 4038	daren@verb.org
AJC Decatur Book Festival	Civic Group	Daren	Wang			404 759 1615	terry@acpe.edu
All About Developmental Disabilities		Kathy	Keeley	GA		30030 404-881-9777	kathy@AADD.org
All Souls Fellowship	Faith-Based	Shayne	Wheeler			404 270 9900	swheeler@allsoulsfellowship.org
Association For Clinical Pastoral Education Inc	Civic Group	Terry	Izaguire			404 320 1472	terry@acpe.edu
Atlanta Friends Meeting	Faith-Based	Georgia	Lord			404 377 2474	atlantaquakers@gmail.com
Baha'is of Decatur	Faith-Based	Navvab	McDaniels				jsaofdecatur@gmail.com
Beacon Hill NAACP	Civic Group					404-577-8977	beaconhillnaacp@gmail.com
Black Parents Collective	Civic Group						diana@cmcatlanta.com
BlazeSports America		Cynthia	Frisina	GA		30030 404-270-2000	cfrisina@blazesports.org
Cambridge Neighborhood Association	Neighborhood Group						
Chelsea Heights	Neighborhood Group	Scott & Bailey	Pendergrast			404 373 3327	chelseaheights@comcast.net;
Church Street Neighbors	Neighborhood Group						
Citizen Advocacy of Atlanta and DeKalb	Civic Group	Derona	King	GA		30030 404 523 8849	info@citizenadvocacyatlanta.org
City of Decatur	Government	Linda	Harris				linda.harris@decaturga.com
City Schools of Decatur	Government	Lillie	Huddleston				lhuddleston@csdecatur.net
Clairemont Elementary School/PTA	Educational			GA		30030	
Clairemont Gateway Association	Neighborhood Group	Beth	Bymes			404 370 1010	bethbymes@bellsouth.net
Clairemont/Great Lakes	Neighborhood Group	Tamara	Beachum Gehle Hancock				t.beachum@gmail.com
Clairmont Oaks	Neighborhood Group	Carolyn	Johnson				cjohnson@clairmontoak.org
Clarke Hill Neighborhood	Neighborhood Group	Lauren	Sudeall Lucas				laurenlucas@gmail.com
CMC Atlanta Decatur Music Center	Educational	Diana	Orozco			404 377 4166	
College Heights Early Childhood Learning Center	Educational			GA		30030	
College Heights Neighborhood Association	Neighborhood Group						
Columbia Presbyterian Church	Faith-Based	Thomas	Hagood			404 284 2441	cpcdecatur@gmail.com
Columbia Theological Seminary	Educational	Marti	Sadler	GA		30030 404 378 8821	sadlem@ctsnet.edu
Common Focus	Civic Group	Jon	Abercrombie	GA		30030 404-226-5032	abie@commonfocus.org
Community Center of South Decatur	Civic Group			GA		30030 404-370-0888	contact@thesolarium.com
Community Foundation of Greater Atlanta		Kathy	Palumbo				kpalumbo@cfgreateratlanta.org
Compassionate Atlanta	Civic Group	Leanne	Rubenstein				leanne@compassionateatl.org
Create Community4Decatur: Black Lives Matter	Civic Group	Leslie	Withers				leslie@ML1945.com
Day League		Phyllis	Miller	GA		30030 404-377-1429	Phyllis@dayleague.org
Decatur Arts Alliance	Civic Group	Angie	Macon	GA		30031 404-371-9583	info@decaturartsalliance.org
Decatur Book Festival	Civic Group	Daren	Wang	GA		30030 404-471-5769	daren@decaturbookfestival.co
Decatur Business Association	Civic Group			GA		30030 404-371-8386	info@decaturdba.com
Decatur Community Coalition	Neighborhood Group						
Decatur Community Coalition	Civic Group						
Decatur Cooperative Ministry	Civic Group	Marlene	White	GA		30031 404-377-5365	marlene@decaturcooperativen
Decatur Cotillion Club	Civic Group						
Decatur DeKalb Housing Tenants Association	Neighborhood Group						
Decatur Downtown Development Authority	Government	Lyn	Menne	GA		30030 404-371-8386	lyn.menne@decaturga.com
Decatur Education Foundation	Civic Group	Gail	Rothman	GA		30030 404-377-0641	gail@decatureducationfoundat
Decatur Family YMCA		Bill	Mckoy	GA		30030 404-377-0241	billm@ymcaatlanta.org
Decatur Farmers Market				GA		30030 404-377-0894	info@decaturfarmersmarket.co
Decatur First Christian Church	Faith-Based	James	Brewer-Calvert			404 378 3621	citykid4evr@gmail.com
Decatur First United Methodist Church	Faith-Based	Dalton	Rushing			404 378 4541	dnushing@decaturfirst.org
Decatur Heights Neighborhood Association	Neighborhood Group	Deanne	Thomas				board@yourdha.com
Decatur High School	Educational			GA		30030	
Decatur Historic Preservation Commission	Government	Angela	Threadgill				angela.threadgill@decaturga.c
Decatur Housing Authority	Government	Doug	Faust			404-270-2101	dsf@decaturha.org

Community foundations can play key roles



chart at right from the “Community Foundations for Civic Health” Project



A pyramid of democracy innovations

mini-publics

- citizen assemblies
- citizen juries
- deliberative polls

participatory structures

- deliberative forums
- participatory budgeting
- commissions that engage
- neighborhood councils
- youth councils

good governance opportunities

- survey panels
- reporting systems
- co-creation of public services
- volunteer mobilization
- mini-grant programs
- scenario mapping

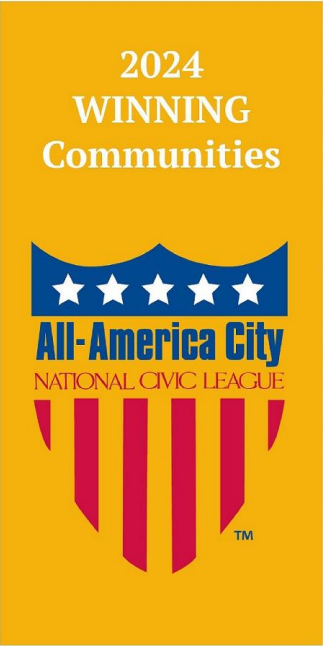
civic tech opportunities

- ideation
- crowdfunding
- e-petitions
- serious games
- texting-based engagement

social and community networks

- hyperlocal online networks
- neighborhood groups
- On the Table/Meet and Eat

When local democracy succeeds, celebrate it!



DANVILLE, VA



EDINBURG, TX



HIGH POINT, NC



LA MARQUE, TX



LEXINGTON, KY



MONROVIA, CA



NEWPORT NEWS, VA



ROANOKE, VA



SEATTLE, WA



WATKINSVILLE, GA



Decatur: All-America City Award Winner



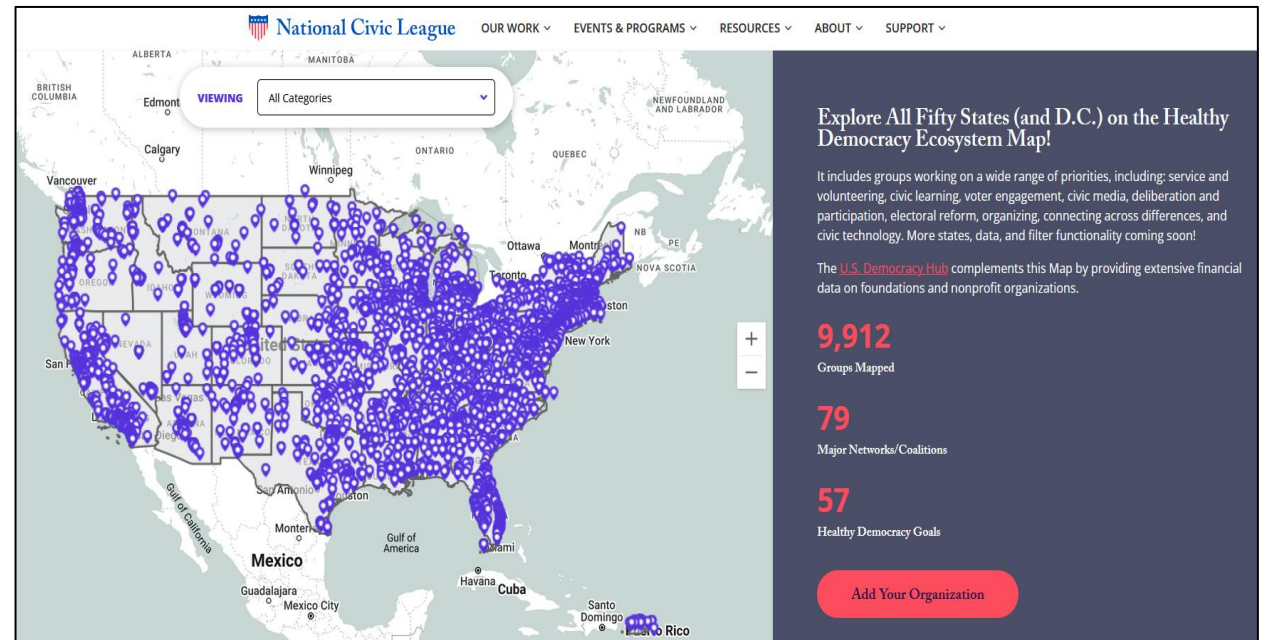
Resources!



Democracy
Innovation

CivicGenius

A program of the National Civic League



www.healthydemocracymap.org