



ANCHORAGE, AK

CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE SCAN

BETTER

PUBLIC

MEETINGS



Democracy
Innovation

Executive Summary Recommendations

Anchorage residents demonstrate strong civic commitment and deep investment in their neighborhoods. However, many experience growing frustration that participation in community councils and public meetings does not consistently feel influential, connected to everyday community life, or accessible to a broad cross-section of residents. Moreover, many residents are highly active within their own networks, organizations, cultural communities, and neighborhood groups, and this activity often occurs in parallel rather than in connection with broader civic processes. While this reflects strong local engagement, siloed participation can unintentionally create fragmentation across communities, making it more difficult to build shared understanding, coordinate action, and sustain trust in citywide decision-making.

Through the Better Public Meetings civic infrastructure scan, residents, community council leaders, nonprofit partners, municipal staff, and elected officials suggest that Anchorage has an opportunity to strengthen relationships between councils and communities, broaden participation pathways, and create clearer connections between public input and municipal decision-making.

This executive summary synthesizes findings from:

- Interviews with residents, community council leaders, nonprofit representatives, municipal staff, and elected officials
- A citywide community survey completed by 120 residents
- A civic engagement scorecard completed by 39 participants at a community council meeting
- A public community forum with 31 participants

It is worth noting that the Better Public Meetings initiative has worked in multiple communities across the country, and much of what is presented below reflects a familiar set of civic experiences. These patterns point to structural design challenges rather than a lack of civic interest or commitment. Anchorage residents are highly engaged, but existing engagement structures do not always align with how people naturally participate in community life. Across all methods, several themes were consistent:

- Anchorage possesses a strong civic capacity rooted in volunteerism, informal networks, and neighbourhood relationships, providing a solid foundation for building a more relational and inclusive civic infrastructure.
- Civic participation is high, yet confidence in its impact is uneven. Clarity on impact is an important opportunity for councils to reflect on.
- Participation in community councils and public meetings is concentrated among a small group of repeat attendees, raising concerns about representation and diversity. Structural barriers such as meeting timing, childcare needs, transportation, language access, and complex information systems narrow who can realistically participate in civic processes.
- Engagement structures tend to focus on procedure and testimony over dialogue and relationship-building, limiting opportunities for shared problem-solving and collaborative learning.
- Many residents experience community councils as disconnected from everyday community life, with engagement often occurring only during moments of conflict or controversy.

COMMUNITY COUNCIL-FOCUSED RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants emphasized that community council leaders and municipal decision-makers play a critical role in shaping civic culture and public trust. The following recommendations focus on leadership actions and system design choices that can strengthen participation, inclusion, and effectiveness without increasing procedural burden.

1. Strengthen the Connection Between Councils and Everyday Community Life

Increase visibility and relevance by positioning community councils as active conveners embedded in neighborhood life, not solely hosts of monthly meetings. Expand outward-facing engagement through partnerships with schools, nonprofits, libraries, and community organizations.

2. Broaden Participation Beyond the “Same People”

Redesign participation pathways to expand entry points for residents who cannot attend regular meetings. Create flexible, issue-based engagement opportunities that reflect how residents naturally participate in community life.

3. Replace Testimony-Heavy Formats with Facilitated Dialogue

Encourage meetings that go beyond one-way testimony and facilitate discussions that promote listening, shared problem-solving, and collaborative learning. Pilot small-group dialogue formats and provide facilitation training to support inclusive participation and a different meeting tone.

4. Implement Clear Feedback Loops and Visible Follow-Through

Increase transparency by routinely showing how community input influences decisions. Publish plain-language summaries explaining what was heard, what actions were taken, and why certain decisions were made, including when constraints limited change.

5. Treat Accessibility as Core Civic Infrastructure

Address structural barriers to participation by improving meeting timing, hybrid participation options, agenda design, and communication systems. Recognize accessibility not as an accommodation but as a foundational requirement for equitable civic participation.

6. Move Beyond Translation to Cultural Navigation

Strengthen inclusion by pairing language access with culturally grounded engagement strategies. Partner with trusted community organizations and cultural navigators to help residents understand how decisions are made and how participation can influence outcomes.

7. Create Youth-Specific Civic Pathways

Develop youth-focused engagement opportunities connected to community councils, including advisory groups, project-based participation, and partnerships with schools and youth organizations. Demonstrate clearly how youth input informs community decisions.

8. Build Leadership Sustainability and Prevent Burnout

Support shared leadership structures, mentorship pathways, and onboarding tools to distribute responsibility more broadly across community members. Design civic systems that protect continuity while reducing overreliance on a small core of volunteers.

9. Redesign Meeting Power Dynamics to Support Psychological Safety

Intentionally structure meetings to balance voices, reduce adversarial dynamics, and create welcoming environments for new participants. Provide training in conflict management.

INTRODUCTION

Public meetings remain one of the most visible expressions of local democracy. They are where policies are debated, decisions are made, and residents are invited to speak directly to elected officials and public staff. In Anchorage, these meetings sit within a broader civic ecosystem that includes community councils, nonprofit organizations, informal neighborhood networks, and the Municipal Assembly.

This research suggests that Anchorage is not lacking in civic energy. Residents are engaged, motivated, and deeply connected to their neighborhoods. Many participate through volunteering, advocacy, schools, faith communities, and informal organizing. At the same time, the structures designed to capture that civic energy, particularly formal public meetings, do not always align with how people naturally engage in community life.

Across interviews, surveys, scorecards, and a public forum, a consistent theme emerged: participation is occurring, but confidence that participation influences outcomes is uneven. Meetings are often well-run and respectful, yet many residents remain unsure how their input shapes decisions. Participation is often concentrated among a small group of repeat attendees, and structural barriers such as time, format, access to information, childcare, language, and familiarity with procedures shape who is realistically able to show up.

These findings do not point to a failure of civic culture. Rather, they highlight a design opportunity. Public meetings were built in a different era, for a different set of expectations about time, information flow, and participation. As communities evolve, so too must the infrastructure that supports democratic engagement.

Encouragingly, there is a growing body of practical work in democratic innovation demonstrating that public meetings can be more relational, inclusive, and impactful, without compromising legal requirements or decision-making authority. Across the country, municipalities and community bodies are experimenting with facilitated dialogue, hybrid participation, clearer feedback loops, youth-specific pathways, and outward-facing engagement that meets residents where they already gather.

There is no single model that fits every community. Anchorage's civic history, institutional structures, diversity, and political dynamics are unique. Effective reform must be grounded in the community, built in partnership with local leaders and residents, and evaluated transparently over time.

The Better Public Meetings initiative seeks to strengthen meeting design through lived experience, broaden participation pathways, clarify influence, and reinforce trust. The recommendations that follow are grounded in Anchorage's own data and civic assets, and are intended to support a sustainable civic infrastructure for the years ahead.

This document presents the findings and recommendations from Anchorage's Better Public Meetings civic infrastructure scan. Drawing on interviews, two surveys, a meeting scorecard, and a public forum, it examines how residents experience community councils and Assembly meetings, where participation feels meaningful, and where structural barriers or trust gaps persist. The report highlights Anchorage's strong civic culture and neighborhood commitment, while identifying challenges related to representativeness, accessibility, meeting design, feedback loops, and leadership sustainability. It concludes with data-informed recommendations to strengthen the connection between councils and local residents.

STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN ANCHORAGE

Taken together, the interviews suggest that Anchorage possesses significant civic capacity, motivation, and local knowledge, but that existing engagement structures struggle to translate this energy into broad, inclusive, and trusted participation. Civic engagement in Anchorage is active and deeply rooted in place, yet often occurs outside formal processes. Community councils, in particular, are widely valued and institutionally significant, but face growing challenges related to representativeness, accessibility, leadership sustainability, and perceived impact. Interviewees consistently emphasized that addressing these challenges will require more than procedural adjustments. Instead, it will require a rethinking of how civic engagement is designed, where it happens, and whose forms of participation are recognized as legitimate.

Strengths of Civic Engagement in Anchorage

Across interviews, Anchorage was described as a city with a strong underlying civic culture shaped by volunteerism, informal problem-solving, and personal relationships. Civic engagement was frequently characterized as pragmatic and relational rather than institutional, emerging from residents stepping in to address community needs rather than relying on long-standing formal structures. Several interviewees pointed to Anchorage's relative youth as an important contextual factor. Without deeply entrenched institutions, residents have historically played an active role in building civic infrastructure themselves. This has fostered a culture in which engagement is often hands-on, adaptive, and responsive to immediate concerns.

This ethos is reflected in Anchorage's dense ecosystem of nonprofits and community organizations. Interviewees described nonprofits, faith-based organizations, advocacy groups, and informal networks as essential civic actors, often serving as trusted intermediaries between residents and government. Engagement was frequently described as occurring through conversations, partnerships, and shared problem-solving rather than through formal testimony or procedural forums.

Interviewees also emphasized strong place-based motivation. Residents were widely described as deeply invested in their neighborhoods and willing to engage when issues directly affect daily life, such as housing, safety, schools, or infrastructure. This suggests that civic energy and concern are not lacking; rather, they are unevenly captured by formal engagement mechanisms.

Challenges of Civic Engagement in Anchorage

Despite this strong civic foundation, interviewees consistently identified a misalignment between how engagement is structured and how people actually live, work, and participate. Formal engagement processes, such as community councils and Assembly meetings, were often described as inaccessible, intimidating, or poorly aligned with everyday realities.

Time was repeatedly identified as a core barrier. Meetings that occur during work hours, require extended attendance, or demand ongoing monthly commitment were described as excluding working residents, caregivers, students, and others with limited flexibility. As a result, participation tends to concentrate among those with the most time and familiarity with civic processes.

Language and cultural barriers further limit participation. Interviewees described Anchorage as highly diverse, but noted that civic processes often assume English fluency and comfort with U.S. governance norms. Several emphasized that translation alone is insufficient when participants do not understand how decisions are made, where authority sits, or how input can realistically influence outcomes. These barriers signal that civic spaces are not always or often designed for everyone.

A recurring and significant challenge identified across interviews was erosion of trust. Many interviewees noted that residents disengage when participation feels performative, predetermined, or disconnected from outcomes. When people cannot see how their input matters or receive no follow-up explaining what happened next, engagement becomes transactional rather than relational. Over time, this contributes to cynicism and disengagement, even among residents who care deeply about their communities.

STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES WITHIN COMMUNITY COUNCILS

Strengths of Community Councils

Interviewees consistently expressed respect for community councils as a foundational component of Anchorage’s civic architecture. Many noted that Anchorage is unusual in formally recognizing neighborhood councils within its charter, and that this recognition provides councils with institutional durability. Community councils were frequently described as important sources of institutional memory and continuity. Interviewees emphasized that councils have played a stabilizing role during periods of political change, helping residents navigate municipal processes and maintain ongoing dialogue with elected officials and city staff.

At their strongest, councils were described as relational spaces where residents build connections, learn about local issues, and access decision-makers. Several interviewees emphasized that the value of councils often lies less in formal resolutions and more in information-sharing, informal problem-solving, and relationship-building. Council-led activities outside formal meetings such as community picnics, neighborhood events, or issue-specific conversations, were frequently cited as moments when councils successfully broaden participation and strengthen community ties.

Challenges of Community Councils

At the same time, interviewees across roles identified significant and persistent challenges facing community councils. A dominant theme was overreliance on a small core of highly engaged participants. Councils were frequently described as being sustained by a limited number of volunteers who carry the bulk of the work. This concentration of responsibility contributes to burnout, limits innovation, and raises concerns about leadership succession.

Representation emerged as a central tension. Interviewees repeatedly questioned the extent to which councils can credibly speak for entire neighborhoods when participation is limited to a small group. Even council leaders themselves expressed caution about being perceived as representing broader community views, noting that this distinction is often lost in public discourse. Demographic misalignment was also widely noted. Councils were commonly described as skewing toward older, long-term homeowners, with renters, younger residents, newcomers, students, and linguistically diverse communities underrepresented. This misalignment reinforces perceptions that councils do not reflect contemporary neighborhood realities.

Process-related barriers further limit participation. Interviewees described council meetings as highly procedural, intimidating to newcomers, and oriented toward parliamentary rules rather than dialogue. For those unfamiliar with meeting norms, the risk of “doing something wrong” can be a powerful deterrent to participation. Public comment structures, rigid agendas, and emphasis on formal motions were frequently cited as discouraging meaningful engagement. Finally, interviewees highlighted ongoing ambiguity about councils’ influence. While councils invest substantial volunteer time, their advisory role can feel unclear or disconnected from decision-making outcomes. This lack of clarity contributes both to frustration among participants and skepticism among residents who choose not to engage.

THE ROLE OF THE MUNICIPAL ASSEMBLY AND ELECTED OFFICIALS IN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Across interviews, participants consistently framed the municipal Assembly and elected officials as central actors in Anchorage's civic ecosystem. Interviewees did not describe the Assembly as detached or inaccessible in the abstract; rather, they described a structurally strained relationship between elected officials, community councils, and the public, which shapes how engagement is experienced, interpreted, and trusted. The interviews suggest that challenges in civic engagement are not the result of indifference by elected officials or apathy among residents, but of misaligned expectations, limited capacity, and engagement structures that place competing demands on all parties.

Strengths and Challenges in the Assembly–Community Council Relationship

Interviewees widely acknowledged that Anchorage benefits from relatively high visibility and accessibility of elected officials compared to many cities. Assembly members are formally expected to engage with community councils, and many do so regularly. This presence was frequently cited as a strength, particularly when Assembly members attend consistently, communicate clearly, and engage in dialogue rather than solely providing updates.

Several interviewees described instances where Assembly members worked productively with councils and community groups to shape outcomes, particularly on infrastructure, land use, and neighborhood-scale planning. These examples were often framed as evidence that engagement works best when relationships are sustained over time, rather than activated only around controversy. Interviewees also emphasized the importance of the Assembly's formal recognition of community councils within the municipal code. This recognition provides councils with access that many other cities lack, reinforcing their role as an institutional bridge between residents and government.

Structural Tensions in Assembly Participation

At the same time, interviewees across roles described persistent structural tensions that complicate Assembly participation in community councils. A recurring theme was inconsistency in Assembly attendance. Interviewees noted that multiple community councils often meet on the same evening, particularly within the same Assembly district, making it impossible for Assembly members to attend all meetings. As a result, attendance can appear selective or uneven, even when driven by logistical constraints rather than disinterest.

Several interviewees also noted that Assembly members face competing expectations at council meetings. On one hand, councils and residents often expect dialogue, responsiveness, and problem-solving. On the other hand, Assembly members may feel constrained by procedural rules, legal considerations, or the risk of appearing to pre-judge issues that will later come before the Assembly. This can lead to cautious or limited engagement that residents interpret as dismissiveness or disengagement. The practice of sending staff in place of elected officials was similarly described as a double-edged issue. While staff attendance helps maintain information flow, interviewees noted that it can unintentionally reinforce perceptions that councils are not a priority or that engagement is being delegated rather than shared.

Community Councils as Intermediaries Under Strain

Interviewees consistently described community councils as occupying a difficult intermediary position between residents and the Assembly. Councils are expected to channel community input upward while also explaining Assembly decisions downward, often without clear authority, resources, or feedback mechanisms. This intermediary role becomes especially challenging when councils invest significant time in engagement but receive limited clarity about how their input is used. Interviewees noted that councils can become the visible face of engagement failure, even when decisions are made elsewhere or shaped by constraints outside their control. Over time, this dynamic contributes to burnout among council leaders and skepticism among residents. Several interviewees emphasized that this tension is exacerbated when engagement occurs late in the decision-making process. When councils are asked to respond to well-developed proposals, engagement is experienced as procedural rather than meaningful, reinforcing perceptions that outcomes are predetermined.

Community Council Resolutions as a Structural Tension

Interviewees consistently framed resolutions not as inherently problematic, but as misaligned with current engagement realities. While resolutions remain an important formal tool, they place representational and procedural demands on community councils that existing participation levels cannot support. Several interviewees noted that resolutions are often treated as the primary measure of council effectiveness, even though much of councils' most valuable work occurs informally and relationally.

At the same time, Assembly members must interpret resolutions cautiously, given uneven attendance, competing inputs, and legal constraints. This dynamic contributes to frustration on all sides: councils feel unheard, Assembly members feel pressured to respond to signals they cannot treat as mandates, and residents experience the process as opaque or performative. Interviewees suggested that reducing overreliance on resolutions and elevating other forms of documented community input could help realign expectations and reduce conflict.

Assembly Meetings and the Limits of Testimony-Based Engagement

Interviewees also identified significant challenges related to Assembly meetings themselves, particularly low public turnout and the dominance of a small number of repeat speakers. These patterns were not attributed to a lack of concern but to the structure of Assembly meetings and the testimony process. Assembly meetings were widely described as lengthy, highly procedural, and intimidating to newcomers. Testimony rules, time limits, and formal settings were seen as favoring those already comfortable with public speaking and governance norms.

As a result, Assembly meetings often attract either highly motivated advocates or residents responding to acute conflict, rather than broad cross-sections of the public. Interviewees noted that residents frequently conflate community council participation with Assembly testimony, experiencing both as similarly inaccessible. Poor turnout at Assembly meetings was thus framed not as disengagement, but as a rational response to formats perceived as high-effort and low-impact.

Information Flow, Timing, and Accountability Gaps

Across interviews, challenges in information flow among the Assembly, municipal departments, community councils, and the public emerged as a critical barrier to effective engagement. Assembly agendas, supporting materials, and policy documents were described as difficult to navigate and inaccessible to non-experts. This complexity often shifts the burden of interpretation onto community councils, where confusion about timelines, authority, or decision points can derail discussion and fuel frustration.

Interviewees emphasized that the most damaging factor for trust is not disagreement, but lack of visible follow-through. When residents and councils cannot see how their input shaped decisions, or when they receive no explanation when it did not, engagement begins to feel symbolic. This perception reinforces cynicism and reduces willingness to participate at both the council and Assembly levels.

Implications for Civic Engagement Design

Taken together, these insights suggest that improving civic engagement in Anchorage cannot focus solely on community councils or public participation in isolation. The Assembly's meeting structures, scheduling realities, communication practices, and engagement timing fundamentally shape whether participation feels worthwhile. Interviewees consistently indicated that trust is built through early engagement, clarity about constraints, consistent presence, and transparent feedback, not simply through more meetings or more testimony. Without alignment between Assembly practices and community-level engagement efforts, reforms to meeting formats or council operations will have limited effect.

SURVEY FINDINGS: OVERVIEW

Two surveys were conducted as part of Anchorage’s Better Public Meetings effort. One focused on a specific Community Council meeting and the other on citywide civic engagement, together offering a clear and consistent picture of public participation in Anchorage. Together, they reveal a community that is highly motivated to engage in civic life, but increasingly uncertain that participation meaningfully influences decisions.

Survey respondents reported high levels of civic activity, including regular attendance at meetings, voting, and advocacy. Participants in the Community Council meeting survey rated their experience positively, frequently noting respectful dialogue, relevant topics, and opportunities to share their perspectives. These findings suggest that many public meetings in Anchorage are functioning well at both the procedural and interpersonal levels.

At the same time, both surveys point to a significant gap between participation and perceived impact. The most common improvement identified by Community Council meeting participants was the need for a clearer explanation of how public comments are used and how they influence decisions. Citywide results reinforce this concern: fewer than one-third of respondents feel heard by local government or believe they can influence decision-makers. Open-ended responses repeatedly describe frustration with engagement that feels performative, late in the decision-making process, or disconnected from outcomes.

The surveys also highlight a pattern of concentrated participation. While respondents are civically active, engagement is dominated by a relatively small group of repeat participants often described by respondents as “the same people doing everything.” This narrow civic core limits the diversity of perspectives in public forums, creates barriers for newcomers, and contributes to burnout among those who remain consistently involved. Persistent structural barriers further shape who participates.

Across both surveys, lack of time emerged as the most common obstacle to engagement, followed by insufficient notice and accessibility challenges related to meeting timing, childcare, transportation, and inconsistent virtual options. While many respondents preferred in-person engagement, a strong majority supported reliable hybrid and asynchronous participation options as essential for fitting civic participation into real-life schedules.

The survey findings suggest that Anchorage residents are willing and often eager to engage, but that confidence in the civic process is fragile. Improving public meetings alone will not be sufficient to rebuild trust. Respondents point instead to the need for clearer feedback loops, visible accountability, broader outreach beyond repeat participants, and engagement opportunities that are accessible, meaningful, and clearly connected to outcomes.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT SCORECARD FINDINGS: ANCHORAGE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

(39 PARTICIPANTS FOR THE NORTHEAST COMMUNITY COUNCIL)

Meeting Experience

- Strongly positive meeting experience: **75%** rated the meeting as **good**, only **7.1%** as **negative**.
- Attendance was largely in-person (**82.9%**) and repeat participants (**82.9%**), suggesting a core group of engaged regulars.

What Worked Well

Opportunity to be heard (**52.1%**)

Efficiently run meetings (**47.1%**)

Relevant topics (**41.2%**)

Respectful dialogue (**38.2%**)

Key Areas for Improvement

- Lack of Clarity on impact: **46.9%** want it to be clearer how public comments influence decisions
- Follow-up and continuity (**31.3%**)
- Efficiency of public comment (**28.1%**)
- Shorter meetings and better accessibility, especially for online participants.

Civic Dynamics and Participation

- Volunteering strain: **69.7%** feel “the same people do everything”.
- Decision-making perceptions: While many feel there are good discussions (**50%**), a sizable share believe “usual suspects dominate” (**32.4%**)
- Community connection: Most feel people know each other (**60.6%**) and help each other (**51.5%**), but some note a lack of diversity and lingering impacts from the pandemic.

Demographic Snapshot

- Skews older (**78% over age 40**), homeowners (**77.9%**), and repeat participants.

COMMUNITY SURVEY FINDINGS: ANCHORAGE BETTER PUBLIC MEETINGS

(120 PARTICIPANTS)

Civic Interest & Participation

- Respondents are highly civically active:
 - **86.8%** engaged in advocacy in the past year
 - **71.3%** attended a community council meeting.
 - **56.5%** attended an Assembly meeting.
- Most participate monthly or more often.

What Motivates Engagement

- Making a difference locally (**89.2%**)
- Supporting causes they care about (**83.2%**)

Feeling Heard & Influence

- **37.9%** feel heard by local government
- **33.3%** feel they can influence decision-makers, while nearly half actively disagree
- **42.9%** feel their voice is valued in community council decision-making.
- Repeated comments cite:
 - Perceived disregard of public testimony
 - Decisions made before meetings
 - Frustration with tone, partisanship, and meeting culture

Barriers to Engagement

- Lack of time (**11.1%**)
- Lack of awareness of opportunities (**22.2%**)
- Need for childcare (**22.2%**)
- Feeling unwelcome or disconnected (**11.1%**)
- Accessibility challenges (timing, childcare, transportation, virtual access)

Information & Communication

- Email newsletters and word of mouth are most effective
- Heavy reliance on social media and Facebook is criticized as exclusionary.
- Many call for:
 - Centralized event calendars
 - Earlier and clearer notice
 - Non-digital options (mailers, radio, newspapers)

Desired Improvements

- Online town halls & hybrid meetings (**58.4%**)
- Interactive digital tools (**51.7%**)
- Pop-up or informal community events (**50.6%**)
- Participatory budgeting (**50.6%**)
- Civic assemblies (**42.7%**)
- Youth councils (**51.7%**)

THEMES FROM COMMUNITY INTERVIEWS

Civic Engagement Is Active, but Weakly Connected to Community Councils

Across interviews, participants consistently described Anchorage communities as engaged, connected, and civically active. Residents volunteer, organize around shared concerns, participate through nonprofits and faith organizations, and engage informally in schools, parks, libraries, and neighborhood networks. However, interviewees repeatedly emphasized that this civic activity has a limited connection to community councils. While councils serve as formal engagement structures, they often operate in parallel with, rather than embedded within, everyday community life. Many residents are unaware that councils exist, unclear about what they do, or uncertain why participation would be relevant.

As a result, community council participation captures only a narrow and self-selecting segment of civic activity. Engagement tends to be episodic, spiking around controversy or immediate issues rather than sustained over time. Councils often interact with the broader community only during moments of conflict, reinforcing perceptions that they are reactive, inward-facing, or disconnected from residents' daily concerns.

Interviewees stressed that this gap should not be interpreted as civic disengagement. Instead, it reflects a structural mismatch between how councils expect participation to occur regularly, procedurally, and in formal settings and how residents actually engage: intermittently, relationally, and around concrete issues in familiar spaces. This disconnect limits councils' ability to broaden participation, undermines their representation, and places unrealistic expectations on a small group of regular attendees to speak on behalf of entire neighborhoods.

Community Councils Are Both Essential and Constrained

Community councils were widely recognized as a foundational element of local democracy. Interviewees noted that councils provide continuity, institutional memory, and a formal pathway for residents to interact with elected officials and municipal departments. When functioning well, they can shape infrastructure investments, influence development decisions, and advocate effectively for neighborhood priorities.

At the same time, participants consistently described structural limitations. Councils often do not reflect the demographic makeup of their neighborhoods, with participation skewing toward long-time homeowners, older residents, and those already comfortable navigating government processes. Renters, younger residents, newcomers, and people working multiple jobs were described as underrepresented or absent. Several interviewees noted that councils can unintentionally function as gatekeepers, privileging those with time, familiarity, and confidence in public process. As a result, councils are often more effective at slowing or opposing change than at proactively shaping it in inclusive ways.

Leadership and Facilitation Shape Participation More Than Rules

Across interviews, the quality of civic engagement was closely linked to how meetings are led, rather than the formal rules governing them. Participants described positive experiences when meetings were well facilitated, focused on shared goals, and designed to encourage dialogue rather than performance. Strong leadership was associated with:

- Clear agendas connected to community priorities
- Active facilitation that balanced voices
- A focus on solutions and opportunities
- Intentional efforts to welcome new participants

Conversely, poorly run meetings were described as dominated by a small number of voices, overly procedural, or unfocused. In these settings, new or less confident participants often disengaged quickly. This pattern suggests that facilitation capacity is a critical, and often undervalued, component of effective public meetings.

Accessibility Barriers Are Structural and Cumulative

Participants consistently identified barriers to participation built into the meeting design rather than arising from a lack of interest. These include meeting times that conflict with work or caregiving responsibilities, long and unpredictable meeting durations, and limited support for childcare, food, transportation, or language access. Access to information was also a major barrier. Agendas and supporting documents were often described as difficult to locate, lengthy, and written in technical language. Navigating municipal websites and understanding where decisions are made was described as confusing, even for highly engaged participants. These barriers create a cumulative effect: even when individuals are motivated to participate, the effort required can feel disproportionate to the perceived impact.

People Engage Most When Issues Are Concrete and Relevant

Engagement was strongest when discussions focused on issues with direct, tangible impacts on daily life, such as housing, public safety, transportation, schools, and neighborhood infrastructure. Issue-based engagement, especially when time-limited and clearly connected to decision-making, was consistently described as more effective than standing forums with broad mandates. Participants noted that people are more willing to show up when they understand why their input matters, what decision is being influenced, and what will happen next. In contrast, meetings that feel abstract, repetitive, or disconnected from outcomes tend to discourage sustained participation. This finding suggests that relevance and clarity are central drivers of engagement.

Alternative Engagement Formats Expand Who Participates

Many interviewees pointed to nontraditional engagement formats that were more inclusive and productive than standard public meetings. These included facilitated small-group conversations, walking tours, community conversations hosted by trusted nonprofits, surveys, and other asynchronous tools. These approaches were seen as less intimidating and better suited to surfacing lived experience. They allowed participants to contribute without needing deep familiarity with procedure or familiarity with procedure or public speaking norms, and they often created space for dialogue rather than debate. Participants emphasized that these formats do not replace formal decision-making processes, but they can meaningfully complement them by broadening participation and improving the quality of input.

Trust, Representation, and Power Shape Participation

Underlying many interviews was a shared concern about who feels heard and whose voices shape outcomes. Participants noted that individuals from historically marginalized communities often feel their lived experiences are dismissed or undervalued in formal settings. Repeated experiences of not being heard were described as a key driver of disengagement. For some, the decision not to participate was framed as rational rather than apathetic, meaning a response to processes perceived as inequitable or performative. This theme highlights that improving public meetings is not only a procedural challenge but also a question of trust and shared power.

Information Design Influences Engagement Quality

Finally, participants emphasized that engagement quality is closely tied to the organization and presentation of information. Poorly structured websites, outdated documents, and dense technical materials contribute to confusion and frustration, often derailing meetings into debates about facts rather than values or trade-offs. Several interviewees noted that without accessible, plain-language information, even well-intentioned engagement efforts struggle to produce meaningful dialogue. Improving information design was repeatedly identified as a prerequisite for more productive public participation.

PUBLIC FORUM RECAP



On January 29, 2026, 31 residents participated in a civic arts exercise of ‘walking a mile in each other’s words’, with people acting out and reading different interactions from a real transcript of a public meeting. This exercise was hosted by Perfect City, with the goal of making the session fun while also opening a dialogue about how we interact in formal meetings and what we might want to change about the structure and relationships meetings currently embody. The group then pivoted to roundtable discussions on what meaningful civic participation looks like, covering what works in community councils, where the current system falls short, and what could realistically change in the next 6–18 months. The conversation was intentionally forward-looking.

What Meaningful Participation Feels Like

When participants were asked what meaningful civic participation looks like when it is working well, the conversation quickly moved beyond procedure and into relationships. In the Mentimeter word cloud, the largest words were dialogue, listening, influential, collaborative, intentional, empathy, kindness, and community. Participants described meaningful engagement not as speaking at a microphone, but as being heard in a way that shapes outcomes.

The emphasis was on good conversation and active listening rather than debate. Participants also expressed a strong desire for participation to be influential. The tone that emerged was hopeful but practical.

Where the System Falls Short

The second round of discussion asked participants to identify system barriers. The open-ended responses surfaced a wide range of recurring frustrations.

Time and Format

“Time” appeared repeatedly. Long evening meetings, fixed agendas, and scheduling conflicts make participation difficult for many residents. Childcare, transportation, and work schedules create real barriers.

The current format of community council meetings is often structured around one-way testimony, which was also cited as limiting. Words like “political theater,” “debate,” and “one-way” appeared. Participants expressed that speaking for two minutes at a microphone does not create dialogue.

Information and Access

Residents noted difficulty finding information, navigating substitute drafts released at the last minute, and understanding how decisions are shaped. Terms like “disorganization,” “lack of knowledge,” and “where to find information” reflected both communication gaps and process opacity. There was a desire for clearer pathways into participation and more consistent information across forums.

Power and Influence

A deeper concern surfaced around power imbalance. Responses included:

- “Predetermined outcome”
- “Officials have predetermined the outcome”
- “Power imbalance”
- “Assembly doesn’t value councils”

These comments suggest that the issue is not simply a matter of format but of trust. When people feel outcomes are already decided, participation feels performative rather than influential.

Culture and Tone

Participants also pointed to divisiveness, hostility, dominant personalities, and incivility as barriers. While many meetings are respectful, the fear of conflict or intimidation can discourage broader participation.

In short, barriers clustered around four themes:

1. Structural constraints (time, childcare, transportation)
2. Format limitations (testimony-heavy, agenda-driven)
3. Communication gaps (information clarity and access)
4. Perceived lack of influence (power and follow-through)

What Should Change in the Next 6-18 Months?

When asked to rank priorities, participants gravitated toward practical structural reforms rather than abstract ideals. The highest-ranked changes included:

- Strengthening the connection between councils and everyday community life
- Replacing testimony-heavy formats with facilitated dialogue
- Institutionalizing feedback loops and follow-through
- Redesigning engagement pathways to broaden participation
- Building sustainability through youth pathways and leadership succession

Specific Ideas from Participants

The open-ended responses provided a rich set of ideas.

1. Improve Dialogue and Meeting Design

Participants called for:

- More time for dialogue
- Shorter, better-focused meetings
- Better facilitation
- Assembly members attending to listen, not lecture
- Less overloaded agendas

2. Close the Feedback Loop

Participants wanted “movement on projects” and to demonstrate “what are the wins in our community we helped make happen”

- Clear feedback loops
- Expanded reporting formats (letters, summaries, member statements)
- Plain-language updates showing how input shaped outcomes

3. Broaden Outreach and Awareness

Several comments focused on simply getting the word out.

- Council-wide mailing to every house
- Using local media and news sources
- Expanding communication beyond social media
- Better forms of outreach

4. Make Meetings More Human

Some of the most creative ideas centered on making engagement feel less bureaucratic:

- Hosting meetings in popular local venues
- Brunches
- Bring-a-neighbor nights
- Making meetings more “fun”
- Pairing artists with councils
- Community identity projects

5. Build Sustainability

Participants recognized burnout and leadership concentration as challenges, suggesting:

- Youth-specific engagement pathways
- Term limits
- Shared leadership models
- Meeting training for executive boards
- Group partnerships with local organizations

RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENHANCE COMMUNITY COUNCIL ENGAGEMENT BASED ON THE DATA

1. Strengthen the Connection Between Councils and Everyday Community Life

Both data sources indicate that meetings alone are insufficient and that residents want engagement to occur in more accessible, everyday spaces. Community councils are structurally separated from everyday community engagement, limiting awareness, relevance, and trust. Measure councils not only by meeting participation or resolutions, but by how they interact with the broader community.

Interview findings:

Interviewees consistently stated that meaningful civic engagement often happens outside formal meetings and that meetings should not be the sole venue for participation.

- *“Go where people already are instead of expecting them to come to a two-hour meeting.”*
- *“We hosted a walking tour through the neighborhood and talked as we walked. It completely changed the conversation.”*
- *“A lot of the most meaningful conversations aren’t happening in meeting rooms.”*
- *“When you put food out and create space to just talk, people open up.”*
- *“People care deeply about what’s happening, but the meeting format doesn’t match how they actually live their lives.”*

Lack of awareness

- *“Most people in the neighborhood don’t even know the council exists.”*
- *“If you didn’t already know about it, you’d never stumble into a council meeting.”*
- *“People have no idea what the council does or why they would go.”*
- *“It’s not that people don’t care — they just don’t know this is a thing.”*

Little interaction outside meetings

- *“There’s almost no interaction between the council and the broader community unless there’s a controversy.”*
- *“The only time people hear from the council is when something is wrong.”*
- *“It’s very inward-facing. Same people, same conversations.”*
- *“Most engagement happens inside the meeting room, not out in the neighborhood.”*

Weak sense of relevance

- *“People don’t see how the council connects to their daily lives.”*
- *“If you’re renting, or busy, or new, it doesn’t feel like it’s for you.”*
- *“It feels like a formal structure sitting on top of a community that’s already doing its own thing.”*
- *“There’s no on-ramp. You either know how it works or you don’t.”*

Episodic engagement

- *“People show up when there’s a crisis, then disappear again.”*
- *“Engagement is very episodic – it spikes around issues and then drops off.”*
- *“The council expects continuity, but people engage in moments”*

Councils as disconnected intermediaries

- *“They’re supposed to represent the neighborhood, but they don’t really interact with most of it”*
- *“It’s hard to represent people you never hear from”*
- *“The council ends up speaking about the community instead of with it”*

Survey Alignment:

- *Respondents strongly supported interactive tools (47%), pop-up events (49%), and new engagement formats.*
- *In the citywide survey, 64% supported hybrid or online town halls, and 49% supported pop-up or informal community events as ways to improve engagement.*
- *Many respondents reported participating civically outside formal meetings (advocacy, volunteering, informal organizing).*

Interventions:

- **Partner with nonprofits, schools, tenant groups, and faith organizations to host engagement outside monthly meetings.**
- **Require or support regular outward-facing engagement.**
- **Examples:**
 - **Tabling at community events**
 - **Pop-up conversations at schools, libraries, parks**
 - **Attending events hosted by nonprofits, tenant groups, or faith organization**
- **Introduce lightweight, visible touchpoints:**
 - **Simple newsletters**
 - **Social media updates**
 - **Issue briefs written in plain language**
 - **Civic awareness campaigns**
 - **“What we’re hearing in the neighborhood” summaries**
- **Normalize episodic participation.**

2. Broaden Participation Beyond the “Same People”

Interview findings:

Interviewees repeatedly noted that the same people dominate meetings and councils. Also, both datasets show that current models privilege those with time and familiarity, reinforcing narrow participation. Participation is not limited by apathy, but by structural expectations that reward consistency over representativeness. Survey demographics confirm interview concerns about representational limits.

- *“Twenty people in a room end up speaking on behalf of ten thousand.”*
- *“They don’t look like the neighborhoods they represent.”*
- *“I’m careful to say I speak for the council, not the whole neighborhood.”*
- *“The meetings are held during the workday, when the people most impacted are at work.”*
- *“The same people keep showing up because they’re the ones who have the time.”*
- *“People care, but they can’t commit to showing up every month.”*

Survey alignment

- In the Community Council Scorecard, 83% of respondents were repeat attendees and 79% were homeowners, indicating a narrow participation base.
- 70% agreed that “the same people do everything” in community councils.
- 63% cited lack of time as a barrier to engagement.
- 32% reported feeling unwelcome or disconnected, and many cited accessibility challenges (timing, format, virtual access).
- 40% cited lack of awareness, suggesting people engage episodically rather than continuously.
- Community Council Scorecard respondents skewed older, homeowner, and repeat participants, with limited renter or youth representation.
- Citywide survey respondents reported feeling disconnected from existing civic structures.
- Community Council Scorecard respondents skewed older, homeowner, and repeat participants, with limited renter or youth representation.
- Citywide survey respondents reported feeling disconnected from existing civic structures.

Interventions

- **Reflect on how formal votes and resolutions entail engagement and outreach into the community to ensure that representation and diversity are central to decision-making.**
- **Do not focus only on formal votes and resolutions, but also elevate the role that convening for the purpose of surfacing priorities can have in building connections.**
- **Elevate issue mapping, question collection, and storytelling as legitimate output.**
- **Offer reliable hybrid and asynchronous ways for people to participate.**
- **Introduce accessible, low-barrier roles and short-term working groups to engage new participants.**

3. Replace Testimony-Heavy Formats with Facilitated Dialogue

Interview findings:

Testimony was widely criticized as ineffective and intimidating. Traditional testimony reinforces power imbalances and discourages dialogue, especially among those less comfortable with adversarial formats. Low perceived influence in surveys reinforces interview critiques of testimony as an engagement tool.

- *“People give testimony and then nothing happens.”*
- *“Sitting in a circle instead of at a dais completely changes who speaks.”*
- *“Public meetings don’t have to look the way they always have.”*
- *“We don’t need more meetings — we need better ones.”*
- *“It feels like decisions are already made before the meeting even starts.”*

Survey alignment

- Only 33% of respondents felt heard by local government, and only 33% believed they could influence decision-makers.
- Open-ended survey responses frequently described meetings as frustrating, dismissive, or predetermined.
- Many cited respectful dialogue and feeling heard as key indicators of a good meeting experience.
- Strong support for new engagement formats, including online tools, interactive platforms, and informal events.
- Respondents called for modernization rather than more meetings.

Interventions

- **Pilot meetings where testimony is replaced with facilitated small-group discussion.**
- **Capture input visually and collaboratively (sticky notes, mapping, shared documents).**
- **Use neutral facilitators rather than chairs for contentious topics.**
- **Train council leaders in facilitation, not just parliamentary procedure.**
- **Separate engagement sessions from governance votes when appropriate.**

4. Implement Clear Feedback Loops and Visible Follow-Through

Interview findings:

Interviewees repeatedly emphasized that people disengage when they cannot see how input matters. Trust was repeatedly identified as the condition that determines successful engagement.

- *“If people don’t see how their input mattered, why would they come back?”*
- *“If people feel dismissed, they don’t just disengage. They distrust the system.”*
- *“When there’s trust, even conflict is productive.”*
- *“People feel like their comments disappear into a void.”*
- *“If you pass a law and no one knows about it, you might as well not have done it.”*

Survey alignment:

- In the Community Council Scorecard, 47% wanted clearer explanation of how public comments influence decisions.
- Citywide respondents cited lack of follow-through and accountability as a major frustration.
- Fewer than one-third of respondents trust that government listens or responds.
- Survey comments frequently referenced cynicism, frustration, and skepticism toward decision-making processes.

Interventions:

- **Pilot new formats with explicit sunset clauses.**
- **Evaluate success based on:**
 - **Who participated**
 - **Whether new voices were heard**
- **Provide simple “you said / we did / we couldn’t” summaries. Publicly acknowledge when something doesn’t work and try again.**
- **Normalize explaining limits and tradeoffs, not just decisions.**

5. Address Accessibility Barriers

Interview findings:

Interviewees remarked that community councils had made progress in adopting virtual and hybrid formats that expand participation, but that opportunities remain to improve access. Hybrid participation was not always reliable; online access to information or agendas was cumbersome; and parliamentary procedure made meetings intimidating for some.

- *“I would raise my hand on the Zoom screen and nobody would call on me. I felt great knowing that I could be at home and still tune into the meeting, but I didn’t really feel like I could participate.”*
- *“It takes multiple clicks to get to the agenda, and it’s not straightforward how you find it.”*
- *“Some of them meet in person only, some of them meet virtually only, some of them meet hybrid.”*
- *“People just don’t understand Robert’s Rules, right?... If I’m going to convince my board chair... she’s going to be like ‘this doesn’t even feel like a welcoming space because they’re subscribed to an old way of doing things.’”*

Survey alignment:

- In the Community Council scorecard, 50% of respondents reported learning about meetings through Word-of-Mouth while 21% learned about it via a website, pointing to information access being dependent on who residents know.

Interventions:

- **Standardize reliable hybrid participation across councils.**
- **Shorten and better focus meeting agendas.**
- **Improve advance notice and centralize engagement calendars.**
- **Simplify and clarify meeting materials using plain language.**
- **Pilot varied meeting times and formats.**

6. Move Beyond Translation to Cultural Navigation

Interview findings:

Language and cultural barriers were explicitly raised. Inclusion requires relational trust and cultural fluency, not just multilingual materials. Move beyond translation to include cultural navigators who explain process, power, and participation pathways.

- *“Anchorage is incredibly diverse, but almost everything is in English.”*
- *“Translation isn’t enough if people don’t understand how decisions actually get made.”*
- *“That alone tells people this space isn’t for them.”*
- *“People are more comfortable engaging in spaces that already feel like theirs.”*

Survey alignment:

- 32% reported feeling unwelcome or disconnected, often tied to accessibility and inclusion.
- Open-ended comments referenced communication gaps and exclusion

Interventions:

- **Partner with trusted community organizations to host engagement in-language.**
- **Hold engagement activities in spaces that are culturally familiar.**
- **Use cultural navigators or community liaisons to explain:**
 - **How decisions are made**
 - **Where power actually sits**
 - **What participation can realistically influence**
- **Simplify materials and reduce jargon across the board.**

7. Create Youth-Specific Civic Pathways

Interview findings

Interviewees suggested that youth are indeed interested in participating on issues that affect them, but they often face challenges in participating. Youth may not understand how to engage with local government or community councils or may have scheduling conflicts, pointing to the need to create pathways that are tailored to their interests and availability.

- *“Students don’t really show up to meetings, but they will respond to surveys.”*
- *“If it’s about something that directly affects them, they engage.”*
- *“A lot of young people just don’t know how to plug into local government.”*
- *“In-person doesn’t work as well — people have different schedules.”*

Interventions:

- **Establish youth advisory groups or caucuses connected to councils.**
- **Use asynchronous and issue-based engagement.**
- **Clearly demonstrate how youth input informs decisions.**
- **Partner with schools and youth organizations.**

8. Build Leadership Sustainability and Prevent Burnout

Interview findings:

Interviewees commented that leadership and responsibilities are concentrated among a small pool of individuals, setting up risks in the future when key individuals retire from or reduce their civic leadership. In addition to broadening the pool of participants, councils should encourage and guide community members to share these responsibilities.

- *“Six people are doing all the work.”*
- *“I worry about who’s going to take over.”*
- *“People like to complain, but very few want to step up.”*
- *“A lot of what actually gets done happens informally because formal process is exhausting.”*

Interventions:

- Introduce shared leadership and role rotation.
- Create low-barrier pathways into leadership roles.
- Develop mentorship and onboarding tools.
- Provide facilitation and governance training.

9. Redesign Meeting Power Dynamics

Interview findings:

Community council meetings give residents the chance to share their perspective on the local issues most important to them. Interviewees expressed worry, however, that council meetings are sometimes vulnerable to unproductive discussion as a result. Especially for salient or controversial issues, comments focused more on expression than deliberation can distract from the council’s role as an intermediary and even discourage participation and trust.

- *“People show up just to grandstand because there’s no other outlet.”*
- *“Once the meeting turns adversarial, new people shut down.”*
- *“The format rewards the loudest voices.”*

Interventions:

- Separate engagement sessions from governance sessions.
- Normalize non-speaking participation.
- Treat disruptive behavior as a design problem, not an individual failure.
- Train leaders and conflict de-escalation and inclusive facilitation
- Clarify roles between councils and the Assembly to reduce intermediary strain.

APPENDIX 1: RECOMMENDATIONS TABLE FROM DATA

Today (Common Experience)	What We Heard	What This Suggests	Options the Data Point Toward
Meetings are the main way to participate	“Most meaningful conversations aren’t happening in meeting rooms.”	Civic engagement already happens elsewhere	Explore engagement beyond meetings
Councils are largely invisible outside meetings	“Most people don’t even know the council exists.”	Awareness is a core barrier	Test more visible, outward-facing council activities
Councils interact mainly during conflict	“The only time people hear from the council is when something is wrong.”	Engagement is reactive, not relational	Pilot regular, non-crisis touchpoints
Monthly attendance is expected	“People care, but they can’t commit to showing up every month.”	Engagement is episodic	Experiment with issue-based, time-limited participation
Councils are treated as fully representative	“Twenty people speak for ten thousand.”	Attendance ≠ representation	Reconsider how councils are framed and measured
Participation favors insiders	“The same people do everything.”	Systems reward time and familiarity	Lower barriers and diversify entry points
Meetings feel detached from daily life	“It doesn’t feel like it’s for me.”	Relevance drives participation	Connect engagement to lived experience
Testimony dominates	“People give testimony and then nothing happens.”	One-way input erodes trust	Explore facilitated dialogue formats
Follow-through is unclear	“If people don’t see how input mattered...”	Feedback builds trust	Test clearer feedback and follow-up practices
Councils act as strained intermediaries	“They speak about the community instead of with it.”	Intermediary role is under pressure	Broaden how community input is gathered and documented