ROCHESTER, MN

CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE SCAN

BETTER PUBLIC MEETINGS

National Civic League

Democracy Innovation

Executive Summary Recommendations

Rochester residents demonstrate strong civic commitment and pride in their community. However, many experience growing frustration that participation in public meetings and engagement processes does not consistently feel influential, connected, or inclusive. Through the Better Public Meetings project, residents, community leaders, youth, staff, commission members, and elected officials suggest that Rochester has an opportunity to create clearer pathways, earlier engagement, and more visible connections between public input and Council decision-making.

This executive summary synthesizes findings from:

- 25 interviews with residents, community leaders, youth, staff, commission members, and elected officials
- A community survey completed by 58 residents
- A civic engagement scorecard completed by 29 residents at City Council meetings
- A public community forum with 41 participants

It is worth noting that the Better Public Meetings project has worked in seven cities across the country, and much of what is presented below is a familiar, if not common, set of experiences. We find that this is more of a structural set of challenges, not a lack of willingness or actual engagement on behalf of the local government. Across all methods, several themes were consistent:

- Civic participation is high, yet confidence in its impact is limited. Only about one-third of survey respondents reported feeling heard or valued in city decision-making.
- The most common frustration is the lack of visible follow-through; residents often do not know how their input influenced Council decisions.
- Many participants believe engagement frequently occurs after decisions are largely set, reducing its perceived value and contributing to engagement fatigue.
- City Council and commission meetings are generally seen as well-run and respectful, but often structured for procedure rather than dialogue or shared learning.
- Participation in formal meetings skews toward repeat attendees, indicating ongoing barriers for working families, youth, newcomers, and underrepresented communities.
- Community co-design and compensated engagement stand out as Rochester's strongest current practices for building trust, inclusion, and shared ownership.

Council-Focused Recommendations

Participants emphasized that City Council leadership plays a critical role in shaping civic culture. The following recommendations focus on Council-level actions and leadership choices that can strengthen trust, equity, and effectiveness, without increasing procedural burden.

1. **Make Public Input Visible and Close the Feedback Loop**
   Increase transparency by clearly showing how community input is considered and reflected in decisions, through public summaries, follow-up reporting, and verbal acknowledgment during deliberations.

2. **Invite Public Engagement Earlier in the Decision Cycle**
   Continue to signal engagement expectations earlier, clarify decision points where input can still shape outcomes, and expand opportunities for public comment before key decisions are finalized.

3. **Evolve Meeting Formats to Support Dialogue and Learning**
   Use study sessions and select agenda items as opportunities for discussion and learning, pilot facilitated Q&A or dialogue, and periodically hold meetings in community venues.

4. **Strengthen Pathways from Engagement to Council Decision-Making**
   Clarify how input from neighborhoods, commissions, and community forums reaches Council, and strengthen coordination and liaison roles to reduce fragmentation.

5. **Improve Timing, Accessibility, and Clarity of Civic Information**
   Support earlier, clearer, and more centralized communication, using plain language, multilingual outreach, and trusted community partners, to broaden participation.

6. **Sustain and Scale Co-Design Model**
   Protect and expand co-design and compensated participation as standard tools for complex or equity-sensitive projects, while allowing flexible models appropriate to project scale.

7. **Reduce Practical Barriers to Participation**
   Continue hybrid participation options and address logistical barriers such as transportation, childcare, meeting timing, building access, and safety concerns.

8. **Support Youth, Newcomers, and Emerging Civic Leaders**
   Strengthen civic on-ramps through youth-focused, action-oriented engagement; civic orientation for new residents; and partnerships with schools, cultural organizations, and faith communities.

9. **Reinforce Norms of Respect, Safety, and Belonging**
   Establish clear expectations for respectful participation, support first-time speakers, and address harmful behavior consistently to ensure psychological safety in public spaces.

10. **Lead Civic Culture Through Visibility and Relationship-Building**
    Demonstrate relational leadership by participating in informal community conversations, supporting civic storytelling and recognition, and modeling learning from public engagement.

INTRODUCTION

This civic infrastructure scan presents reflections on research for the Better Public Meetings project in Rochester, MN. The report is based on interviews, a community survey, and a civic engagement scorecard. In total, 25 people were interviewed, including residents, grassroots organization leaders, non-profit stakeholders, youth, local media, city staff, city commissions, and city elected officials. The community survey was completed by 56 people, and 25 people completed the scorecard at city council and commission meetings. In addition, a public forum was held on December 4, 2025, with 41 attendees, and a summary of the conversation is also included.

Rochester's Community Strengths

Rochester emerges from interviews as a city defined by civic pride and a strong culture of volunteerism. All quotes in this document are from the interviews. Interviewees emphasized the city's intersectional diversity across race, profession, language, and country of origin as a key strength that has fostered openness and inclusion. The presence of Mayo Clinic and related institutions attracts global talent and promotes cross-cultural interaction. This professional diversity translates into "a more vibrant and progressive city" with strong advocacy networks around sustainability, equity, and health.

> **"We have much diversity in Rochester... a community full of hardworking, kind, real people... resilient, willing to collaborate."**

These quotes reinforce Rochester's reputation for openness.

Several participants described community co-design and grassroots collaboration as emerging hallmarks of local engagement. Some participants spoke about co-design projects that invite residents to shape public infrastructure from parks to accessibility improvements, producing "beautiful outcomes" such as Indigenous ceremonial sites, fully accessible public pools, and multilingual outreach programs.

Across sectors, residents highlighted Rochester's tight-knit neighborhoods, strong faith-based networks, and a culture of neighborly connection, described as "a cornfield town with city amenities" where people still greet one another at the grocery store and organize block picnics. "Community is about more than one person's desires... a hive mind can only benefit everyone." Youth participants reflected this civic ethos through their work on the Rochester-Olmsted Youth Council, emphasizing inclusivity, learning, and collaboration with nonprofits and city departments. Their experiences illustrate how youth are both learning and modelling participatory governance. Overall, residents grounded the idea of collective purpose.

Community organizations such as We Bike Rochester, Pamoja Women, and Family, Consumer, and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA) exemplify grassroots civic engagement, building coalitions, connecting residents across interests, and advocating for safe, human-scale urban design. In short, Rochester's civic strengths lie in its social cohesion, expanding inclusion infrastructure, and adaptive engagement culture, which blend institutional openness and community initiative.

Challenges to Engagement in Meetings & Other Community Events

Despite these strengths, nearly every interview surfaced challenges that limit equitable participation. A recurring theme was uneven access to information, with some participants, including residents and officials, indicating that they "don't know what's happening until it's already happened." This lack of timely or accessible communication leaves marginalized groups - predominantly low-income, immigrant, and non-English-speaking residents - underrepresented in decisions that affect them.

Several participants noted that public meetings are often dominated by a small, familiar group of speakers, while working families and newcomers lack the time or comfort to attend. Some participants described a typical City Council meeting where "the same four people" show up, and attendees rarely stay beyond the items that affect them directly. They worried that strict meeting structures, such as two-minute-at-the-mic, limited feedback loops, and evening scheduling, reinforce disengagement rather than broad participation.

Grassroots leaders echoed these frustrations, citing worries about gatekeeping within cultural communities, where only a few leaders are regularly invited to city discussions and information "does not trickle down" to the broader public. Additionally, others criticized engagement that feels "performative" where feedback is collected but not acted upon or reported back. "We were asked to meet, share input, and then never heard back," said one participant. "People don't want to meet just to meet," said another.

Residents also raised concerns about meeting accessibility and safety. BIPOC and Muslim participants described feeling exposed in livestreamed sessions, fearing that public comments could invite online harassment. "Sometimes I'm the only Hispanic person in certain meetings… there needs to be more protection." Safety was also brought up about the evening sessions and location of the meetings where variation in public behaviour outside of the meeting setting can be "scary."

Others noted that timing, format, and follow-up often exclude parents, second-shift workers, and residents without stable internet access. For youth, there was a note about being mindful of public transportation and also parenting responsibilities to have them reflected in considerations for public participation. "Transportation for disability is huge… even in a larger county like Olmsted, it's almost impossible to do two things in a day." There were thus expansive examples that broaden the definition of barriers to include mobility and energy limitations.

Moreover, even well-structured city forums face turnout issues. Observers have noted that mandatory neighborhood meetings on developments often draw "12 to 20 people and usually the same faces" despite mailed notices. While some officials attribute this to apathy, others frame it as a failure of design: "Engagement for engagement's sake," as one person put it, a "checkbox" rather than true dialogue. These dynamics point to an overarching challenge: Rochester's engagement ecosystem is rich but uneven. Participation is energized in pockets, yet hindered by structural and cultural barriers that make participation inconsistent and inequitable. "It's very difficult to ask for your needs to be met when you're already being messaged that you're a drain on society."

Emerging Shifts in Rochester's Civic Culture

Interviews reveal that Rochester's civic culture is undergoing a significant transition toward more inclusive, collaborative, and adaptive forms of engagement. Since 2018–2019, the city has increasingly shifted from one-way public consultation to community co-design, compensating residents to participate in shaping projects from inception through implementation. While widely valued for elevating authentic voices and shared ownership, co-design is also seen as resource-intensive, prompting questions about scalability and flexibility.

Participants highlighted emerging equity-focused tools, such as Community Benefit Agreements, as a way to embed resident priorities into binding, durable frameworks that extend beyond individual leaders or election cycles. At the same time, COVID-19 fundamentally altered engagement habits. Virtual participation expanded access but reduced informal relationship-building and introduced new challenges, including safety concerns and disruptive behavior, leading to changes in public comment practices. Hybrid models are viewed as a promising path forward, particularly for reaching broader and more diverse audiences.

Youth engagement emerged as a source of renewal, with students expressing interest in action-oriented roles rather than traditional, informational meetings. Interviewees also emphasized the ongoing need to rebuild trust and representation, especially in light of racial justice reckonings that exposed gaps between institutional intentions and community expectations. Concerns were raised about integrating transient newcomers who live and work in Rochester but remain disconnected from civic life.

Finally, respondents underscored the importance of better linking engagement spaces, such as neighborhood groups, commissions, and City Council, to ensure community input meaningfully influences policy decisions. While participants recalled a strong pre-COVID history of cross-sector dialogue and collaboration, they noted that this consistency has waned in recent years. Taken together, these shifts point to a civic turning point: a move away from procedural engagement toward more co-created, trust-based governance that could redefine how power is shared between Rochester's government and its residents.

SURVEY FINDINGS

Two quantitative tools were used in Rochester: a civic engagement scorecard administered at City Council sessions and a community-wide survey. These tools are not statistically representative surveys but rather snapshots of community participation, and they can be contrasted with the City of Rochester's own representative surveys. Better Public Meetings focuses specifically on civic engagement and local democracy. Taken together, these data sources present a picture of a community that is actively engaged, yet often uncertain about the value and impact of that engagement. Across both instruments, respondents report high levels of participation in meetings, elections, and civic processes. At the same time, many express doubts that their involvement meaningfully influences outcomes. This tension is captured in comments such as, "Engagement doesn't always matter in terms of the outcome – it's what local leaders decide regardless of community feedback," and "Wouldn't make any difference if I did."

Perceived Lack of Accountability and Feedback

A dominant theme across open-ended responses is the absence of visible accountability and feedback following public input. Respondents frequently describe a process in which input is solicited but outcomes are not explained. One participant summarized this concern directly: "Lack of accountability. Inputs are sought but no feedback on outputs." Others echoed this sentiment, noting that they want "representatives being responsible for their decisions" and "accountability to spending dollars." This perceived lack of follow-through contributes to skepticism about whether participation matters. When respondents do not see how their comments influence decisions, or receive acknowledgment at all, confidence in the process erodes, even among those who remain civically active.

Engagement Occurring After Decisions Are Effectively Made

Many respondents believe that opportunities for public engagement occur too late in the decision-making process to be meaningful. As one person noted, "By the time a topic is on the City Council's agenda, the decision has seemingly already been made." Others reinforced this concern by repeating that "inputs are sought but no feedback on outputs," suggesting that participation is procedural rather than influential. Some respondents expressed interest in more direct forms of early engagement, including "more ballot initiatives where residents can directly vote on policy proposals." These comments indicate a desire not only to be heard but to participate at moments when outcomes are still flexible.

Communication Challenges: Timing, Visibility, and Clarity

Respondents consistently describe communication challenges, not in terms of volume but timing and accessibility. Several respondents said they were unaware of meetings or opportunities until it was too late, noting, "I was unsure when they were happening," and "More awareness of when meetings happen." Others described difficulty finding information at all: "Information is not easy to find online, normally I find out after the fact." In addition to meetings, respondents also cited gaps in communication about ways to get involved outside of formal hearings, including "better communication about volunteer opportunities." These responses suggest that information exists, but is not reaching residents in a timely or usable way.

Fragmented Information and the Need for Centralization

Regarding communication challenges, respondents frequently reported difficulty navigating civic information across multiple platforms. One respondent explicitly recommended, “Build a website that informs the community about events and news.” Others referenced relying on external or informal platforms because official information was difficult to locate, again noting that “information is not easy to find online.” These responses point to a need for centralized, trusted sources of civic information that help residents easily understand what is happening, when engagement opportunities exist, and how to participate.

Barriers to Civic Understanding and Entry

Some respondents identified structural barriers that go beyond communication, particularly a lack of accessible civic education. One respondent articulated this challenge in detail: “The initial barriers to entry are often education about how local government is structured, how it functions… I have had to become incredibly involved and self taught. This is not a realistic way to have inclusive informed democratic participation.” This respondent suggested approaches such as gamification and incentives tied to learning, highlighting an interest in making civic education more approachable and engaging rather than solely informational.

Desire for Specific, Actionable Engagement Opportunities

Respondents also expressed a preference for engagement opportunities that are clearly defined and concrete. One person asked for “being really specific with needs I could get involved with and time expectations in a centralized location online.” Another emphasized the importance of clarity around issue-based opportunities, such as “better communication about volunteer opportunities, especially as it relates to urban greening efforts.” These comments suggest that residents are willing to participate but need clearer guidance on what is needed, how much time it will take, and how their involvement connects to broader goals.

Transportation, Access, and Physical Barriers

Practical access barriers also limit participation for some residents. Transportation challenges were cited directly, with respondents noting, “I couldn’t get there due to health issues, transit, or plans. Taking the bus takes a very long time,” and “Evening routes are hourly.” Others mentioned that “too much street construction” made it difficult to get around. These barriers highlight that even well-designed engagement opportunities may exclude participants if logistical challenges are not addressed.

Respect, Inclusion, and Engagement Fatigue

While many respondents described public meetings as well-run and respectful, others reported feeling dismissed or disconnected. Comments such as “feeling unwelcome or disconnected” and repeated references to input being collected without acknowledgment contribute to a broader sense of disengagement. Notably, these experiences appear to contribute to engagement fatigue, particularly among long-term participants. When residents repeatedly invest time without seeing visible impact or receiving feedback, cynicism increases and motivation declines. As one respondent implied, participation can begin to feel performative rather than meaningful.

COMMUNITY SURVEY SUMMARY

(58 TOTAL RESPONDENTS)

Overall Participation & Motivation

- Most respondents are already civically active:
  - **~56.4%** participate monthly or more often.
  - **~72.9%** attended a public meeting in the past year.
- Strongest motivations:

83.3% Supporting a cause they care about

74.1% Making a difference locally

- Social motivations (meeting new people) and skill-building ranked lower.

Barriers to Engagement

- Top barriers:

47.9% Lack of time

50% Lack of awareness of opportunities

29.2% Feeling unwelcome or disconnected

- Transportation and childcare were barriers for a smaller but meaningful group.
- Many open-ended responses expressed cynicism, with a belief that public input does not meaningfully affect outcomes.

Information & Communication

- Primary sources for community information:

76.6% Social media

44.7% Websites/ event calendars

59.6% Email newsletters

- Repeated comments indicate information is:
  - Hard to find
  - Often received after decisions are alreadymade
- Digital platforms are seen as somewhat effective, but rarely “very effective.”

Perceptions of Local Government

- Mixed to negative sentiment:

Only **~33.7%** agree they feel heard by local government.

~36.7% agree their voice is valued in city decision-making.

Nearly one-third actively disagree with both statements.

- A recurring concern is lack of transparency and accountability, especially around how decisions are made before reaching City Council.

Engagement Preferences

- Strong preference for hybrid participation:
  - Majority attend mostly in person, but value online access.
- Respondents want:
  - Clearer evidence their input matters
  - Earlier involvement in decision-making
  - Centralized, easy-to-find engagement opportunities

Demographics Snapshot

(Notable SKEWS)

- Predominantly:

95.5% Homeowners

77.5% White/European descent

88.9% College-educated (with college or graduate degrees)

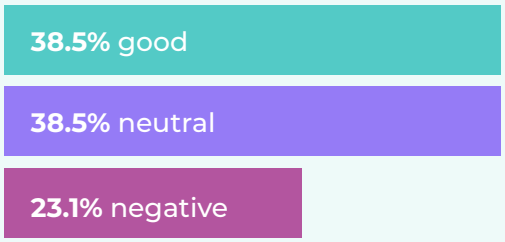
- This suggests feedback reflects a highly engaged but not fully representative subset of the community.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT SCORECARD SUMMARY

(29 TOTAL RESPONDENTS)

Meeting Experience

- Overall meeting experience was moderately positive:



- Most respondents were repeat attendees (**92.9%**), indicating experienced participants rather than newcomers.
- **82.1%** attended in person, reinforcing the importance of physical meetings.

What Worked Well

- Strengths identified:

- Officials and staff interaction rated positively by many.

What Needs Improvement

- The single biggest gap:
  - Lack of clarity on how public comments influence decisions (63%)
- Other concerns:
  - Limited diversity of participants
  - Information sometimes shared too late
  - Desire for better acknowledgment or response to public comments
- Several comments praised process efficiency but questioned substantive impact.

Civic Culture Signals

- Volunteering:
  - Many feel the same people do most of the work.
  - A sense that people help in crises, but sustained engagement is uneven.
- Information sharing:
  - Often viewed as complicated or delayed.
- Decision-making:
  - Majority believe leaders do not report back.
  - A significant share feel leaders don't listen, even when discussions are good.

Community Connection

- Mixed picture:
  - Some trust and mutual help exist.
  - Notable mentions of tension, lack of mixing across groups, and lasting effects from the pandemic.

INTERVIEW THEMES

The Current State of Public Meetings

Across all perspectives, Rochester's public meetings were described as well-run but unfulfilling. They function smoothly, yet leave both residents and officials longing for dialogue. One participant summarized the frustration this way: "People get up sometimes in disgust and leave because they've done their two minutes and they're not getting anything in return." When public comment periods were shortened from three minutes to two, participants said it improved order but discouraged participation: "It's less politicized now, but it's not particularly productive. Until 'we' can find a better way, it's what 'we' have." Another reflected on the lack of conversation: "'We' tell people 'we' won't respond, and if 'they' ask a question, they'll get follow-up later from staff, but it's not a dialogue." Others felt this was an intentional design: "The public has sent me to do their bidding. The real public engagement is whether they elect me again."

Several described the same pattern: people come for issues that directly affect them, speak briefly, and leave. "By the time we get to the interesting things, it's just staff and council left wrestling with issues." "When you go to these meetings and there are topics that are irrelevant because people are trying to survive… they're not going to go." Even logistical factors, such as streaming requirements and formal dais seating, were said to make discussion harder: "It would be helpful for them to be around a table. But the cable streaming requirement keeps them apart." Altogether, the comments depict a civic process that is efficient yet emotionally thin, as the structure rarely involves conversation.

Barriers to Inclusion and Accessibility

While Rochester's population is growing more diverse, many participants pointed to structural barriers that shape who gets heard. In official meetings, several participants cited the difficulty and problematic assumptions of how easy it is to participate in public comment portions of an agenda.

> **"You're up at a podium, under bright lights. It's intimidating…two minutes isn't enough to even get your nerves settled."**

At the same time, "We ask for input, but people don't hear back. They start to feel like meetings are performative."

Still, others see the contrast that people are selective in their engagement. "Most people only come for their item, then leave. By the time we get to real decisions, the room is empty." Moreover, "Nobody comes to Planning Commission meetings except the people who get their little cards saying there's a zoning change within one block of their house… You come when you have a personal interest or you're fearful." From within the organization, staff described efforts to broaden access: "We're thoughtful about which projects need additional engagement. We have community co-designers who are compensated, and multilingual community connectors who bridge both language and cultural translation."

Others shared that even simple services can pose barriers: "We've had to bring in interpreters just to explain parking rules or business licenses. Sometimes we hold entire sessions in another

language." Community leaders reinforced that accessibility is as much about trust as logistics. Another participant contrasted new engagement models with the past: "Before 2019, we'd be asked to fill out surveys or meet with the city, and then never hear back. The new co-design model was the first time there was real follow-through." The message across these stories is consistent: inclusion happens when communication is reciprocal, when people can see how their input matters.

Co-Design as an Innovative Local Engagement Practice

Many participants described community co-design as a significant shift in how Rochester engages residents, especially those from underrepresented groups. One recalled their first experience with the process: "They asked us to come to a council meeting and explain what the project meant to us. It was the first time I felt my advocacy and the city's process were connected." Another described it as, "Our extreme sport engagement process. We co-design with community, and we compensate them. It's messy, but it's real." For residents involved in the work, the impact was tangible:

> **"People felt like they were there from the beginning…not that something was just put out there for them, but that they had built it."**

Yet others noted that formal systems have been slow to adapt: "They could override their own policies to make things more flexible, but they haven't wanted to." Co-design represents both a breakthrough and a challenge, proving that genuine collaboration is possible, but only when institutions are willing to share control.

Community Identity and Cohesion

Rochester emerged as a city in transition, prosperous and diverse, yet still searching for cohesion. Several described a divide between long-time residents and newcomers: "It's becoming a larger city, but we don't yet have a cohesive community. Newer residents, especially medical trainees, often see community life as secondary. They experience a problem, don't know where to go, and contact the mayor, because that's the visible role."

Others saw opportunity in that constant renewal: "Even if someone's only here two years, it's a chance to engage civically and take those skills wherever they go." Rochester's diversity was described not only in racial or cultural terms but in "profession, age, and country of origin." Participants saw this as a defining strength: "For a city our size, that's rare, and it normalizes inclusivity."

Young people echoed both optimism and frustration. Members of the city's youth programs said, "It's pretty much a flat hierarchy. We meet monthly to talk about new city projects, but it's more listening and learning." "It's less action-based and more discussion-based." Some youth described going door to door for neighborhood events and local outreach, emphasizing that participation feels most meaningful when it connects directly with people. Across all voices, there was agreement that Rochester's civic identity is still forming and seeking stronger pathways for connection and shared purpose.

Power, Trust, and Decision-Making

Questions about who holds power and how decisions are made surfaced repeatedly. It was mentioned that elected officials don't fully control what appears on meeting agendas: "We don't control our own agenda. It's written for us." Others outside government echoed this imbalance from a public perspective: "We show up to meetings, give feedback, and then hear, "There's been loads of engagement. But we never see how our feedback is factored in. Engagement starts to feel like a checkbox."

Community members also noted that engagement tends to spike during election cycles: "Some leaders only show up around election time. They know which projects affect our communities, but we don't see them until then." Meanwhile, officials described the tension between openness and order:

> **"We have a disciplined process, but that means people don't get to talk beyond the rules."**

Across viewpoints, one thread stands out: trust is built not by access alone but by responsiveness and showing people their participation matters beyond a meeting. Some officials say elections remain their primary mechanism of accountability, while others worry that this perspective narrows civic engagement. "People assume if they elected me, that's their engagement," one council member said. "But representation also means listening between elections." This tension underscores an opportunity to rethink elected officials' roles as connectors in ongoing civic dialogue rather than gatekeepers of formal participation.

City officials noted that procedural design limits the connection between formal meetings and broader engagement efforts. This structure reinforces a separation between deliberation and dialogue. As one put it, "It's our meeting, but the public doesn't have much opportunity to comment once the hearings are over."

"Several council members noted that residents often see elected officials primarily through formal meetings, rather than as partners in problem-solving. One member observed, "People see the mayor because she's visible at events, but they don't necessarily know how to reach their own council member, or that we have different roles in policy-making."

This highlights the need for structured pathways that connect community concerns from neighborhood forums and commissions back to decision-making bodies." Elected officials want engagement to extend beyond meetings, to reframe representation and engagement.

Civic Culture and Institutional Learning

Despite frustrations, participants conveyed a deep sense of optimism about Rochester's democratic evolution. Staff highlighted a growing culture of experimentation: "People have been willing to try new things like equity audits, language pay differentials, and co-design. It's more open than any organization I've been in." Others saw hope in the shifting tone of local leadership:

> **"With new faces coming in, there's a chance to rethink how meetings are run."**

Even those who defended existing procedures found pride in Rochester's civility: "We don't have anyone fighting for the microphone or making disparaging comments. Our meetings are disciplined." Long-time residents grounded the conversation in perspective: "I've seen tense moments regarding land use planning, farmers fighting farmers, but civic life always ebbs and flows. People care when it matters most."

Rochester's civic landscape reflects two parallel systems: one procedural, one participatory. Formal meetings maintain order and legality; informal processes like co-design foster creativity and inclusion. Bridging these worlds will support the city's democratic future. The collective message from these interviews is clear: residents don't simply want to be consulted; they want to help shape decisions. As one participant put it: "We don't want to be asked what color the building should be. We want to help decide if it should be built at all."

COMMUNITY FORUM HIGHLIGHTS

The City of Rochester, in partnership with the National Civic League's Center for Democracy Innovation, hosted a community forum on December 4, 2025, attended by 41 participants, as part of Rochester's participation in the Better Public Meetings pilot. The evening combined a research update with interactive engagement and small group dialogue to better understand how residents experience public meetings today and how those meetings can be improved.

Forum Format and Engagement Tools

The forum was intentionally designed to model alternative approaches to public meetings. Participants engaged through:

- Interactive Mentimeter activities to create an informal, welcoming environment, including light-hearted questions, local trivia, and a live map showing where attendees travelled from across Rochester.
- A research presentation highlighting national and local trends in civic engagement and public meeting participation.
- Roundtable discussions that allowed for deeper conversation, relationship building, and shared problem-solving among residents.

These tools helped shift the experience from one-way public comment toward dialogue and shared learning.

Key Themes from Mentimeter and Roundtable Discussions

What Meaningful Participation Looks Like

Across tables, participants consistently described meaningful participation as:

- Everyone having an opportunity to be heard, not just the same few voices.
- Meeting cultures that intentionally invite participation, including structured opportunities for each person to speak.
- Clear pathways from ideas to action, with visible outcomes.
- Awareness of what is happening in local government and how to get involved.

- Strong motivation, resourcefulness, and active engagement from both residents and officials.
- Recognition and celebration of community changemakers and volunteers.

Where Current Public Meetings Fall Short

Participants identified several barriers that limit engagement today:

- Burnout when residents do not see change or understand how their input influenced decisions.
- Short timelines between agenda release and decision-making that limit meaningful feedback.
- Limited accessibility of information, documents, and communication channels.
- Lack of clarity about how local government works and what roles elected officials and boards play.
- Meetings that feel overly formal, performative, or dominated by rhetoric rather than dialogue.
- Challenges engaging diverse communities, including immigrant communities and underrepresented voices.

Ideas to Improve Public Meetings

Participants offered a wide range of practical, actionable ideas, including:

Improving Communication and Access

- Share agendas, issues, and background information earlier and in clearer language.
- Use targeted outreach through neighborhood associations and trusted community groups.
- Improve livestreaming and digital access to meetings.
- Create clearer feedback loops so residents know when and how their input was considered.

Rethinking Meeting Formats

- Less formal meeting structures that encourage dialogue rather than one way comment.
- More opportunities for small group or one-on-one conversations.
- Quarterly or more frequent study session-style dialogues focused on learning and discussion.
- Holding council meetings, study sessions, or office hours in neighborhoods and community spaces.

Strengthening Civic Infrastructure

- Training and clearer role definitions for boards and commissions to ensure participation is meaningful.
- Opportunities for boards and commissions to report back publicly on their work.
- Youth education about local government roles and decision-making.

- Community engagement contracts with local organizations that can serve as bridges between government and residents.

Building Relationships and Trust

- Regular, informal opportunities for residents to connect with elected officials.
- Greater acknowledgment and response from officials to public input.
- Explicit efforts to invite and include immigrant communities and other underrepresented groups.
- Publicly addressing harmful rhetoric and reinforcing norms of respectful engagement.

Overarching *Participant* Recommendations to Establish Better Public Meetings

Adjust Public Meeting Structure to Support Dialogue & Participation

- Add brief, facilitated discussions or Q&A after agenda items.
- Allow public comment after Council discussion, not only before.
- Use roundtable or non-dais seating during study sessions.
- Publicly report back on how public input influenced outcomes.
- Rotate some Council sessions into neighborhoods, schools, or libraries.
- Move substantive “reports and recommendations” into public hearings when votes are pending.
- Establish meeting norms to reduce intimidation and unsafe behaviors.
- Improve meeting visuals so speakers are visible and slides are less text-heavy.

Additional Strategies

- Pilot hybrid roundtable study sessions.
- Add short deliberation windows before votes.
- Test neighborhood-hosted Council sessions.

Diversify & Improve Information, Outreach, and Communication

- Expand interpreter use and multilingual materials.
- Use culturally embedded venues for information sharing.
- Create a centralized citywide engagement calendar.
- Share agendas and topics earlier and more clearly.
- Reduce survey fatigue with shorter tools and visible “what happens next” summaries.
- Improve communication about volunteer and civic participation opportunities.

Additional Strategies

- Launch a centralized citywide engagement calendar.
- Expand Community Connector and interpreter roles.
- Embed outreach in neighborhood and cultural spaces.

Support Elected Officials' Community Engagement

- Reintroduce informal "coffee with a councilmember" events.
- Increase topic-based community conversations.
- Clarify Council roles and how to contact individual Councilmembers.
- Support officials' outreach with administrative tools.
- Increase between-elections visibility.

Additional Strategies

- Quarterly district listening sessions.
- Monthly rotating neighborhood presence by Councilmembers.
- Mobile office hours.
- Outreach toolkits for Council offices.
- Civic engagement roles guide.

Strengthen Coordination Between City Council, Administration & Commissions

- Create visible pathways for community and commission input to reach Council.
- Establish cross-commission liaison roles.
- Formalize coordination between commissions and Council committees.
- Clarify commission purpose, expectations, and influence.
- Improve building signage and access for meetings.
- Integrate engagement insights into staff reports.

Additional Strategies

- Cross-commission liaison roles.
- Shared agenda review sessions.
- Joint retreats.
- Plain-language decision pathway diagrams.
- Long-term charter review.

Support Meaningful Engagement Pathways for Youth, Newcomers & Neighborhood Groups

- Expand compensated co-design models.
- Pay community liaisons and multilingual connectors.
- Engage residents in trusted community spaces.
- Provide civic orientation for newcomers.
- Offer childcare, transportation, and flexible meeting times.
- Create action-based roles for youth.
- Maintain relationships with co-design groups after projects end.

Additional Strategies

- Expand compensated co-design networks.
- Mini co-design labs.
- Fund youth-led civic projects.
- Civic Welcome Kit for newcomers.
- Participatory budgeting or grant-making pilots.
- Deliberative forums using civic lottery models.

PARTICIPANT RECOMMENDATIONS AND IDEAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

What is presented in this section draws strictly from the community. All information is pulled from various data points across the community survey, city council meeting scorecard, the interviews, and the in-person public forum. A key point to keep in mind is that changes to support and enhance civic engagement in Rochester do not simply fall on staff and elected officials within government. Other organizations, residents, and networks, through cross-sector support, are part of the solution and implementation to enhance how people can feel heard in government decision-making processes.

Redesigning Public Meetings for Dialogue and Transparency

Participants consistently suggested that public meetings could evolve from formal presentations into genuine civic conversations.

- Create structured discussion periods. Several participants proposed brief, facilitated dialogues after each agenda item, rather than a single open comment block. One noted, "if people could comment after hearing discussion, rather than before, they'd feel heard."
- Reintroduce informal seating formats. The dais setup and cable streaming requirements were cited as barriers to natural dialogue. Participants recommended roundtable study sessions or hybrid forums where officials and residents sit together rather than apart.
- Show responsiveness publicly. Many said residents lose faith when their comments go unanswered. They urged the city to report back at later meetings or online, summarizing how public input influenced outcomes.
- Rotate meeting times and venues. Some suggested holding periodic council sessions in different neighborhoods, schools, or libraries to reach residents who rarely attend city hall meetings

Many participants said they rarely receive follow-up after providing input. "People come, they speak, and they leave. There's no sense of closure," one long-time participant observed. "Even if it's just a short note saying their comment was reviewed, that would help.' Another participant who has chaired a commission added, "We collect feedback, but there's no loop back to show how it's used." "Participants advocated for formal feedback mechanisms such as "public input summaries" attached to council decisions or visual dashboards tracking community suggestions. These tools could close the loop and reinforce trust. As one participant noted,

"Engagement fatigue isn't about showing up, it's about not knowing what happens next."

This opened avenues for Public Hearings for "Reports and Recommendations": "A lot of our work and a lot of the issues that the public would like to comment directly on end up in our reports and recommendations. ... Let's put those in public hearings rather than reports and

recommendations." Because of the topical issues in "reports and recommendations," consider where and when substantive votes happen, and put these issues into public hearings so residents can comment before decisions are finalized, allowing issues that residents care about to make it to a space where they can speak.

There were suggestions for Study sessions to be spaces for engagement: "It would be helpful for the council to get around a table because those study sessions are for them to be digging in and understanding where we've been heading with certain policy or project planning. … The style isn't different enough from a business meeting for it to be a real conversation." Turning study sessions from passive briefings into interactive discussion tables, ideally with space for community or partner input, would be a culture shift from presentation to conversation. Deliberation design matters because, "Right now, they're still sitting on a dais… it doesn't feel like a conversation." This aligns with a need for acceptable group norms in public meetings, where tensions arise when some people record meetings or engage in other behavior that makes others feel unsafe/uncomfortable, and then are less likely to participate or return.

Participants wanted to see the city's civic engagement work leveraged more in council, elected official, and commission meetings. "One of the areas I think engagement happens, and why I'm interested in boards and commissions, is because many people who reach out to the mayor want to do something. … We should be elevating those voices into our decision-making process." "I think there's an opportunity to integrate across age and demographics, including people who've lived here longer and those newer to Rochester, into a shared experience of governance." Rochester's Civic Engagement Office and commission network could be leveraged more strategically to connect public energy with council deliberation. "We should be elevating those voices into our decision-making process. Part of this is also framing commissions as potential conduits rather than silos.

A recurring theme across interviews was the need to reconnect Rochester's public engagement system, from neighborhood discussions and commissions to Council decision-making. "Elevate community voices into decision-making," indicates a clear throughline: the city's next possible avenue for innovation in civic design lies not in creating more meetings, but in creating connected, conversational spaces that carry public input through to decisions. This further connects to the selected venues. Specifically, some comments about the difficulty of getting into buildings with seemingly little to no signage, which can confuse people as they try to join. Officials themselves have struggled to get into city hall rooms and have been locked out, which underscores how discouraging it would be for the public to stick around.

Commissions were described as possible intermediaries in engagements with unclear purpose. "Members serving on boards and commissions voiced concern that these structures, while well-intentioned, often fail to serve as bridges between public input and City Council action. One commission chair explained, "Our ordinance says we're supposed to guide policy, but in practice, it's four people reviewing documents. There's no real channel to Council." Another commission member added, "No one from the public attends unless they're already connected. We need a way to make commissions relevant again.' This is a missed opportunity for alignment and feedback. Both city and community participants suggested formalizing cross-representation between commissions and Council committees. Such coordination could strengthen policy alignment and create continuity in civic learning. Currently, as one participant described, "We're all rowing in different directions."

Building Inclusive and Accessible Engagement

Inclusion was described as both logistical and cultural. Suggestions emphasized meeting people where they are and recognizing barriers beyond translation.

- Invest in multilingual outreach. Several participants advocated expanding the city's community connector and interpreter programs to make government materials consistently available in multiple languages.
- Pay community liaisons. Co-design models were cited as successful because they compensate participants from marginalized groups, legitimizing their expertise and time.
- Use culturally embedded venues. Rather than expecting residents to come downtown, the city was encouraged to host engagement sessions within immigrant associations, faith spaces, and apartment complexes, making participation routine rather than exceptional.
- Simplify digital tools. Participants mentioned survey fatigue and technical barriers; they suggested shorter, more transparent online tools that show results and "what happens next."

"You can't just say you want to hear from everyone and not come where they are," one participant emphasized.

Expanding and Institutionalizing Co-Design

The co-design process was viewed as one of Rochester's most promising democratic innovations. Many urged that it be scaled, standardized, and resourced.

- Make co-design a citywide standard. Participants proposed applying the approach beyond pilot projects by integrating it into planning, budget, and infrastructure decisions.
- Formalize community training. Some recommended establishing an annual co-design academy to teach facilitation, budgeting, and collaborative design to both staff and residents.
- Create long-term feedback loops. Participants asked that co-design groups remain connected after project completion, serving as advisory bodies during implementation.
- Protect compensation in budgets. Multiple interviewees noted that sustained funding is key to avoiding token participation: "Paying community designers made it real, not performative."
- There were also requests for thinking about the adaptability and malleability of co-design for different purposes, and whether it has to be a long-form approach in every instance.

Engaging Youth and New Residents

Younger interviewees and newer residents offered forward-looking ideas for expanding participation beyond traditional models.

- Transform youth councils into action-oriented teams. Students wanted to move from discussion-based meetings to hands-on civic projects.
- Create mentorship links. Pair youth members or new residents with experienced board or commission members to demystify processes and build continuity.
- Welcome programs for new residents. Participants suggested civic orientation sessions for new professionals and immigrants, highlighting how to engage in city decision-making.
- Use schools as civic incubators. Several emphasized that civic engagement should be integrated into school life, "not just government class once a year, but real collaboration with city departments."
- "Assume disability. Assume diversity. Just make it the given, not the exception." "Compensate people. If you want them to take time off work, make it worth their while."

Strengthening Trust and Responsiveness

Across all interviews, participants described a need for visible reciprocity and a consistent pattern of acknowledging, responding to, and acting upon public feedback.

- Track and publish engagement outcomes. Residents suggested public dashboards showing which projects received feedback, what was changed, and what remains pending.
- Close the feedback loop. Follow-up emails or reports should summarize how citizen suggestions influenced final decisions, even when they were not adopted.
- Increase visibility between elections. Some recommended that elected officials commit to quarterly, informal, topic-based community conversations free of procedural constraints. Re-establish the roles of elected officials in communities through 'coffee chats' and secure additional support from public administration resources for outreach and engagement efforts.
- Reward departments that demonstrate learning. Several suggested including engagement quality metrics in staff evaluations or departmental performance reviews.

"Engagement shouldn't be a checkbox. People need to see where their input went."

Re-imagining Civic Space and Culture

Finally, participants proposed transforming Rochester's civic culture from procedural to participatory through design, education, and storytelling.

- Host civic storytelling events. Community members recommended open mic or "democracy night" events where residents share civic experiences, challenges, or small wins.
- Use art and design in participation. Visual workshops, mapping exercises, and cultural events can be found to be more engaging than traditional hearings.
- Celebrate small acts of governance. Participants encouraged recognizing community members who organize neighborhood improvements, attend meetings, or serve on boards, reframing participation as a shared civic identity, not a chore.

"People care when it matters most, but we can make caring part of everyday life," one long-time resident reflected.