PARTICIPATORY AND INCLUSIVE

NEIGHBORHOOD DEMOCRACY

IN NEW YORK CITY

Event Summary



Better Public Meetings

National Civic League

Democracy Innovation

Perfect City

Columbia World Projects

Thinking Doing Columbia Global

NYC Civic Engagement Commission

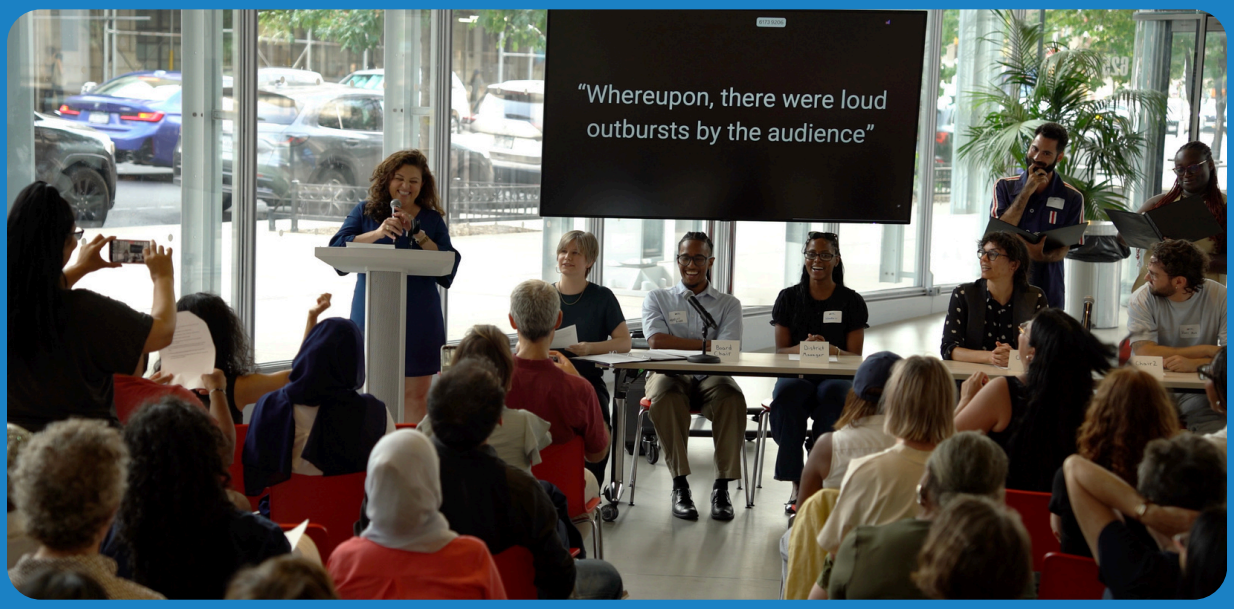
Participatory Performance

On July 22, 2026 at the Bollinger Forum, the Better Public Meetings NYC project hosted *Inclusive and Participatory Neighborhood Democracy,* a public performance and discussion. In total, 90 people were in attendance, including community board members and staff, civic leaders, and residents.

The session included a live civic arts performance organized by Perfect City called ‘Community Board’, in which members of the crowd re-enacted portions of real community board meeting transcripts. The objective of the session was to have members of the crowd walk a mile in each other’s words and reflect on how boards operate, including challenges and tensions around agendas, public comments, and Robert’s Rules of Order.



Dr. Sarah Sayeed of the NYC Civic Engagement Commission addresses the forum as part of the Perfect City-organized performance



Research Presentation

After the performance, Nick Vlahos from the National Civic League explored findings from the League's ongoing research, drawing on interviews with civic leaders across local government. This research was organized into seven findings:

Institutions Need to Connect to Existing Civic Energy. Whether or not it is well-connected to the local community board, civic energy exists across New York City in the form of neighborhood organizations, cultural groups, faith institutions, and educational events.

Public Meetings Should Support Dialogue. Traditional meetings with strict public comment procedures limit the ability for decision-makers and the public to effectively communicate. There are, however, alternative approaches that foster more collaborative dialogue.

Participation Structures Require Intentional Outreach. To expand participation, community boards must proactively engage their community. These communications should be tailored to the community, considering language access and existing community messengers.

Innovation Already Exists among Community Boards. Innovations exist in individual community boards across the city. But there is considerable potential in promoting collaboration and information sharing between boards.

Strengthening Civic Infrastructure Requires Supporting Those Who Deliver It. Many community board members and staff have faced challenges with expanding workloads and limited onboarding. Establishing peer-learning networks while increasing resources and training could solve this gap.



Nick Vlahos shares findings from the National Civic League's Better Public Meetings research in NYC



Audience members reflect and discuss research findings

Community Boards Face a Tension Between Governance and Participation. The same formal procedures that permit efficient administration can also hamper inclusive and engaged dialogue.

The CEC as a Connector. The CEC has a potentially significant role to play in fostering participatory innovation among community boards. This could include convening cross-sector partnerships, organizing a peer-learning community, preserving and sharing best practices, and leading listening tours in communities.

The presentation of these findings set the scene for participants to hold small group discussions to identify best practices for neighborhood democracy and innovations for public meetings. These responses were captured through Mentimeter, a live polling and ideation platform, which participants can access with their phones. Summarized themes from those discussions are included on the following pages in this report.

What's Next for Better Public Meetings?

The project team will combine the preliminary findings with the themes produced at the forum as well as quantitative survey data. This research will be compiled in a final report which will include recommendations and potential pilot programs.
You can learn more about the Better Public Meetings project at:
https://www.activote.net/ncl-cecnyc-perfectcity/

If you're connected to a community board (as a member, district manager, borough president, etc.), please take the time to tell us some of your best practices so we can share them and build awareness of good efforts to engage members and the public. This form also encourages any member or district manager interested in joining our community boards' peer learning network to indicate their interest.
https://bit.ly/NYCBpracticeinventory

Audience Ideas: What is a best practice for community boards ?

Active listening and respectful engagement

- Listen carefully to every concern.
- Create opportunities for questions and dialogue.
- Ensure all voices feel heard.

Proactive community outreach

- Meet people where they are.
- Use multiple communication channels (email, SMS, outreach).
- Better advertise opportunities to participate.

Accessibility and inclusion

- Offer meetings in multiple formats (in-person, hybrid, virtual).
- Schedule meetings to accommodate work and caregiving responsibilities.
- Make participation as convenient as possible.

Relationship building

- Follow up after meetings to report progress.
- Build coalitions and maintain ongoing engagement rather than one-off interactions.
- Understand participants' interests, skills, availability, and preferred communication methods.

Creating welcoming spaces

- Provide refreshments or food to encourage participation.
- Foster a comfortable environment that encourages conversation.

Overall takeaway: Participants emphasized that effective neighborhood democracy depends on listening, inclusive outreach, accessible participation, and lasting relationships with residents.

Small Group Discussion: What Should an Ideal Public Meeting Entail?



Overall takeaway: Participants envision public meetings as well-organized, collaborative, action-oriented spaces that prioritize dialogue, relationship-building, and meaningful follow-up rather than one-way presentations.