



Better
Public
Meetings

August 2026

Facilitating Public Conversations

A Guide for Anchorage's Community Councils



Democracy
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This guide was written and prepared by Nick Vlahos, Matt Leighninger, and Christopher Boose from the National Civic League's Center for Democracy Innovation (CDI), and Aaron Landsman from Perfect City.



Founded in 1894 by Teddy Roosevelt, Louis Brandeis, and Mary Mumford, the Civic League championed the democracy innovations of the early 20th Century; today the League hosts projects such as the Center for Democracy Innovation, maintains the Model City Charter, organizes the All-America City Award, publishes the *National Civic Review*, and supports an extensive national network of local elected, appointed, and civic leaders



Perfect City is a hub for the study and the practice of democracy, founded on the Lower East Side of New York City and growing across the country. They use tools from theater, community organizing, popular education, and design to help communities move away from polarization, toward more inclusive democratic practices.



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Federation of Community Councils, Inc. is a non-profit organization whose Board is elected by the 35 community councils within the Municipality of Anchorage. Their mission is to foster and support neighborhood engagement through administrative, technical, financial, and outreach assistance.



YWCA Alaska is dedicated to eliminating racism, empowering women, and promoting peace, justice, freedom, and dignity for all. The organization champions marginalized voices throughout its work, organizing advocacy, convening community conversations, and empowering youth.



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The work of the National Civic League and Perfect City on this project was made possible by the AAA-ICDR Foundation. The Foundation's mission is to support the prevention and resolution of conflicts by expanding access to alternative dispute resolution.

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Introduction

Facilitation is for Everyone

The National Civic League, in partnership with arts collective Perfect City, the Federation of Community Councils and the YWCA Alaska, collaborated on a Better Public Meetings project to understand the strengths, challenges, and opportunities for civic engagement within community councils in Anchorage. The initial findings were presented at a public forum on January 28, 2026 and were refined into a research report (a local civic infrastructure scan) with a set of recommendations. From that list, two pilots were selected: to provide training on facilitating public meetings and resolving collective challenges in a civil way, and to design and implement a special community council meeting with a novel agenda. This guide advances both objectives by preparing community members to lead engaging, productive, and constructive public conversations.

During the research phase of the Anchorage Better Public Meetings project, themes related to addressing difficult conversations emerged: new people attending a meeting for the first time and experiencing contention that discouraged future attendance; some meetings being taken over by loud, dominant voices; and hearing from the most involved people in the community over other voices. These concerns indicate a need to strengthen the design and facilitation of these structured conversations within Anchorage's community councils. It doesn't mean there aren't good conversations already happening, but that techniques are needed to create welcoming spaces where everyone is heard.

Who is this for?

This guide was designed for community council leaders in particular, but these modules can also be used by other civic organizers, facilitators, and volunteers who design and lead public conversations.

This resource can be shared with future community council members seeking guidance on meeting design and facilitation. One goal of the Better Public Meetings recommendations is to promote institutional memory and peer learning between leaders, present and future. We hope that this practical set of tools will help to accomplish that goal with a particular focus on empowering new leaders who do not have a background in collaborative facilitation.



*Better Public Meetings Forum
Anchorage, January 2026*

A great deal of research indicates that civil dialogue is not only possible but regularly emerges in well-designed processes. When conversations are designed to make participants feel heard and orient them toward the future, they have valuable effects on participants. Positive conversations encourage people to return, become more civically involved, and feel empowered. That sense of efficacy is what most people strive for, and we can create those foundations, but they require a concerted approach by those who create the space for people to come together and the buy-in of those who show up.

The following modules include how to frame a topic for discussion and then create an outreach plan to get people involved, designing the space, factoring accessibility considerations and being inclusive of diverse voices, how to navigate different situations and structure conversations for two-way dialogue, then moving beyond conversation to generating ideas and deciding outcomes, and lastly, implementation and creating a feedback loop.

Anyone can facilitate a public conversation

Rather than an innate ability, good facilitation is the result of best practices and intentional design. To help you develop this skill, there are examples throughout this document, including links to additional resources. These will let you dive deeper into the art and science of hosting public conversations.

Successful Dialogue

Core Design Principles of Civil Public Meetings

- A good topic
- Intentional outreach
- Enabling civility through ground rules
- Facilitating small group conversations
- Balanced participation among attendees
- Listening to understand
- Sharing reasons for perspectives
- Creating transparent decision-making from outputs
- Follow-up and feedback loops



Signs of Successful Public Dialogue

- People leave feeling heard
- Diverse members of the community are present
- The community has a better understanding of people's various perspectives
- Tensions are surfaced constructively
- Priorities are identified and trade-offs are clarified
- Participants build new relationships
- New people feel encouraged to return
- Decision-makers acknowledge public input and outcomes are responsive to shared perspectives

Designing conversations for your community starts with understanding the local civic landscape. You can check out Anchorage's 2026 Civic Infrastructure Scan, conducted as part of the National Civic League's Better Public Meetings project, here:

<https://www.nationalcivicleague.org/case-studies/community-councils-connect-with-their-residents-in-anchorage>

Module 1

Framing the Topic & Creating an Outreach Plan

Effective facilitation begins long before the start of discussion and continues after the conversation adjourns. In this guide, we follow facilitation across the following chain of events:

Facilitation Sequence



The start of any good public conversation is a relevant topic that sparks conversation. Once a topic is selected, the next step is to consider who it impacts and who we want present in the room to share their perspective and lived experience on the topic. Different topics often require a very targeted audience. Some topics will affect specific demographics differently, requiring both seeking their input and navigating how the issue affects people. For example, if the topic involves youth in some way, young people should become a focal point for thinking about how to hear from them.

Actions

- ☐ **Select the topic of the conversation.**
- ☐ **List the stakeholders in your community.** This would include local non-profits, grassroots organizations, digital networks, and schools that might support, promote, sponsor, or co-host the event.
- ☐ **Design an outreach strategy** for any specific groups or populations you would like to reach:
 - Are there specific spaces where that group or population can be found? Consider schools, places of worship, seniors' centers, community centers, parks, sports facilities, public fairs, etc.

- Which communication methods best reach your target audiences? How does the effectiveness of different methods (handouts, email, social media, local news, etc.) differ?
- What other organizations and institutions engage this audience? Consider schools, universities, local governments, faith communities, businesses, and others.

- ☐ **Identify your potential partners.** Are there influential community leaders who could advertise the event or mobilize a specific community? Who else might be interested in this topic and able to contribute time or resources?
- ☐ **Craft your message.** Across multiple modes of advertising, articulate what the event is, how people can attend, and why they should care.

Considerations

What are the most pressing issues that need to be discussed? At the same time, picking a topic doesn't have to be only about what's hot right now. Of course, if a topic is chosen that is currently affecting people, it is more likely to draw them in. People can and do tend to be motivated by issues that directly affect them. At the same time, it is sometimes good to take a step back to consider prospective issues that affect a community over the longer term, enabling strategic thinking and prioritization. Narrow issues or very niche topics can also lead to a narrow demographic turnout.

Intentional outreach can help avoid self-selection bias that might otherwise have led only to the most active people in the community attending. Having a broad set of voices in the room should be the goal. One way to think about outreach is to consider partners in a community, including various groups that meet regularly and have a base of members. Doing outreach doesn't have to be something an internal team does on its own. It does mean that connections need to be made in the community, and relationships built to establish trust, and even a willingness to co-host events. This also shares the burden, time commitment, and resources. Groups with networks and contact lists might also be willing to promote your event.

Specific barriers. Getting people to participate requires understanding the specific barriers in the community. This might include the time of day, the location (see Module 2), the date, and whether it conflicts with other events that could limit turnout. Additional accessibility-related factors are discussed in the module below.

Further Reading

- Conference planning checklist from the University of Toronto Facilitation Toolkit:
<https://www.accessiblecampus.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/A-Checklist-for-Planning-Accessible-Events-1.pdf>

Module 2

Designing an Accessible & Inclusive Process & Space

The space where you host a conversation has a major impact on the accessibility and inclusivity of that conversation. A specific location can be more or less physically accessible, welcoming, or safe for one group versus another. Likewise, how a room is arranged can make the difference between a productive, engaging, and even fun atmosphere and a closed-off one. When people enter a room, they first observe the space, and this sets initial expectations. Access to technology, like cameras, screens, and internet, will also affect your choice of location.

Actions

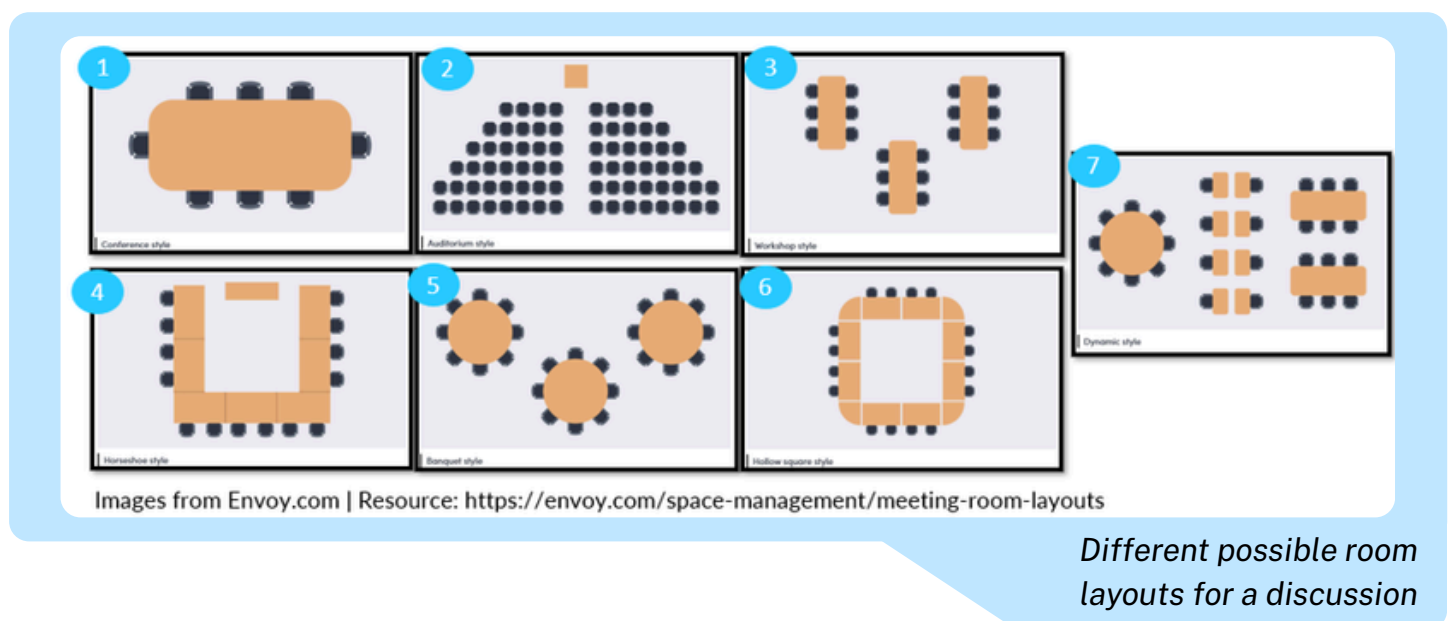
- ❑ **Select a venue for your conversation.** You might also consider doing a site visit to ensure you understand how the space feels. Be sure to evaluate what tables, chairs, and technology are available.
- ❑ **Plan the layout of the room.** Consider what format you want to use for individual discussions: (See **Modules 3 and 4** for further considerations about discussion format)
 - **Plenary formats:** Bringing all participants together is great for sharing crucial information but can make participation more intimidating and favor louder voices.
 - **Breakout discussions:** The smaller a conversation, the more comfortably people can share and explain their perspectives. Moreover, this format favors more informal conversation, including back and forths, rather than testimonies.
 - **Round vs Square:** As you design your space, consider its shape. Is it round or rectangular? The former can promote a sense of equality between participants, while the latter might inadvertently favor participants in certain seats over others.
- ❑ **Proactively address barriers to participation.** For many people, attending a public meeting can compete with meal-time or time spent with family. Offering food and/or childcare could help make meetings more accessible.
- ❑ **Consider preparing a logistics checklist or a run of show document** to help you plan the flow and timing of the conversation.

Considerations

As you select your venue, consider its placement in the community. Is this space familiar to people? Can they get there by transit? How long does it take to get there by vehicle, transit, or bike? Is the facility publicly accessible, meaning is it open to the public? Are there any associated costs (rental fees, liability insurance), or can it be used freely? Does it allow external catering or food, or does it require its own catering or food services? Sometimes, a public space can also encourage walk-ins. Does the facility have accessible washrooms and wheelchair-accessible entry?

Next, consider room set up. The layout of a space has a powerful impact on the conversations that happen within it. The standard town hall format, with a raised stage and a podium (image 2 below), sets up a conversation that is less peer-to-peer. We want to avoid speaking to people and exercises where the public targets organizers. Town halls are notorious for this when they set up rows of seats and microphones. Leverage tables to cluster people into smaller groups. As noted below, several small-group setups let people know they'll be conversing with those at their table; they are the main communicators, not someone on a dais.

Remember that a space usually must accommodate different ways to learn, listen, and communicate. How can a space provide different types of sensory experiences? For example, does it offer a way to present slides or videos? Are there whiteboards or chalkboards? Make sure that AV is available and working, including free Wi-Fi access if you or participants must access the internet. Are people who don't speak the same primary language (English) offered a way to communicate in their own language through a live translator? Translation can be a significant challenge, especially for local government bodies that may lack resources to hire professionals. But it is not an impossible challenge: AI-powered translation, including live translation through one's phone or even wearable glasses, is now a reasonable option, and in some communities, local leaders and kids are willing to serve as translators.



Consider your prospective attendees' competing priorities. Most events that feed people indicate they want folks with families to attend, or just anyone who would otherwise be making or eating dinner in the evening. Food is also a way to build initial, informal relationships before discussing issues. Breaking bread is a social activity. Part and parcel of feeding people is also possibly thinking about how youth participate. This might mean designing an agenda that includes youth or allocating space for childcare. The more we work toward an inclusive space that reflects diverse lived experiences, the more we'll gain perspectives we might not even consider. Besides, youth tend to bring out the best in adults, or adults might be a bit more controlled.

More information on how to make an event fun and creative is listed later in the document.

Accessibility Checklist:

- Is the venue accessible via transit? Would you consider paying or reimbursing travel costs?
- Is the event accessible to those with children? Is there available childcare, or is the space kid-friendly?
- Do you need translation or interpretation?
- Can people using wheelchairs comfortably access the venue?
- If providing food, do you have food options that work for everyone who might attend?

Further Reading:

- **Accessible Conversations in Small and Rural Libraries:**
<https://www.ala.org/sites/default/files/tools/content/230614-ppo-accessible-conversations-guide-WEB.pdf>

Module 3

Structuring & Guiding Discussions for Civil Dialogue

Conversations are more effective when participants bring or develop shared expectations. This includes expectations both around the purpose and format of the conversation as well as the norms of engagement. Absent these shared expectations, conversations can become a free-for-all, with participants focusing on sharing their point of view rather than listening. This becomes more challenging the more voices are in the conversation, highlighting the potential value of small group breakouts compared to a plenary discussion. In a large conversation, disagreements can quickly escalate. These challenges can be mitigated through a skilled facilitator who can help establish expectations early on and coach a group back when they stray from them. Rather than a rigid set of steps, facilitation is a set of tools to solicit input and encourage reflection in different ways. This module will share considerations to help your facilitation skills.

Actions

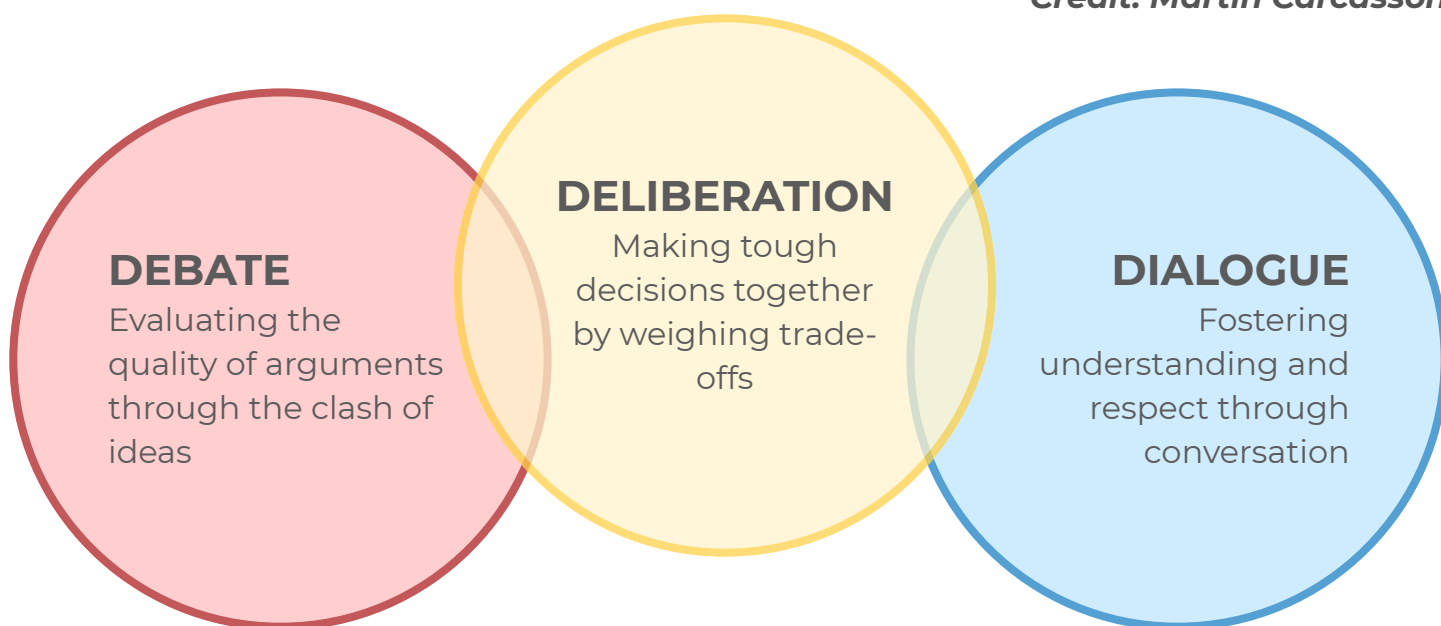
- ❑ **Consider the goals and format of your conversation.** With your given topic in mind, clarify if you are trying to find solutions to a collective problem (deliberation), surface community concerns (dialogue), or establish certain truths (debate). You will then need to design the exact format of the conversation: small group discussions often permit deeper conversation than a plenary session.
 - One useful design is the World Café, where there are several tables, each discussing a different question. Groups rotate between tables, except for notetakers.
 - There may be other conversational frameworks worth considering, including role-play (see **Module 6**), round robins, paired conversations within groups, and more. **Module 4** also discusses activities to promote ideation, sense-making, and prioritization.
- ❑ **Establish a set of questions** that need to be answered or reflected upon or a specific problem to be solved. The questions to be asked will depend on the purpose of the conversation (see **Module 4**'s discussion of Deliberation vs Dialogue). The prompts you prepare should inspire participants to offer specific answers, share relevant personal experience, and offer rationales for their perspectives. As you prepare, be mindful of the total time you have, as it is your responsibility to pace the conversation.
- ❑ **Start your conversation by facilitating introductions and inviting participants to design ground rules with you.** Introductions are vital to breaking the ice and building rapport for a livelier discussion. Ground rules should be tailored to the group, but in general should encourage inclusive participation, mutual respect, and active listening.

Considerations: Before the Conversation

Establish the goals of your conversation. This may seem obvious based on an existing challenge in the community, but the root of any given problem could be very different based on an individual's perspective. Moreover, a conversation is often about more than addressing an external challenge or question; it also confronts how community members feel about that issue, themselves, and each other. Conversations can also establish what is true and what isn't. Carcasson's three forms of interactive communication (see below) help to capture these distinctions and encourage us to ask ourselves "What kind of conversation am I convening?" Well-intentioned facilitators will frequently bring people together to solve a shared problem (deliberation) or foster shared understanding (dialogue) only for it to evolve into a debate over certain facts. Being mindful of these different goals can help a facilitator work proactively to keep a group on the track that is right for them.

Forms of Interactive Communication

Credit: Martin Carcasson



Setting ground rules. We need to be realistic about what we can expect of people who bring different perspectives and life experiences. At a bare minimum, people have to show respect for each other. We can disagree without personally attacking or insulting each other. The biggest consideration here is setting the ground rules for participation up front, out loud, and displayed, and having people agree to them verbally. Much of what happens at a table is a mix of a facilitator keeping the conversation going and other members keeping each other on task and maintaining their own safe space.

Best Practice	Impact
Treat others as you would want to be treated	Participants earn mutual respect
Take turns speaking and invite those who haven't spoken	Everyone is able to contribute
Practice active listening and avoid interruptions	Participants reflect on each other's words
Critique the idea rather than criticize the person	Discussion doesn't become personal
Be curious and ask questions	Participants learn from each other
Share reasons, rationale, and experience for your perspective	Participants feel comfortable sharing their view
Welcome - and expect - respectful disagreement	Disagreements do not paralyze discussion
Be kind and friendly to your neighbor	Participants trust each other

Consider how participants can contribute. It is often assumed that the only way to contribute to a public discussion is public speaking. As you design an inclusive conversation, it can be useful to rethink this assumption. Different people learn, listen, and participate in various ways. Some participants thrive in a large group, others in a small group or in one-on-one conversations. In the next module on ideation, we also discuss written exercises that could encourage quieter participants to share their perspective. Regardless of how you design the conversation, be mindful of how it invites participation.

Considerations: During the Conversation

What are people learning or responding to? A good facilitated conversation can start with reflections on a presentation or set of material that they have all learned about together, which creates a starting point to build upon; or, people can be encouraged to share their own experiences about something; and lastly, people will commonly be asked a specific question to ensure the conversation is moving in a specifically targeted direction. Structuring a conversation means steering it with clear instructions and a defined end goal.

Are participants actively listening, and do they feel heard? The next factors to consider at a round table conversation are active listening and hearing from everyone at the table, or at least encouraging everyone to participate. When people talk in smaller groups, they are speaking as peers, which means giving time for people to share ideas and encouraging them to build on one another's ideas. The more we reiterate what people say, the more it comes across as if we're listening, and the more we encourage people to explain their thoughts, the more clarity people gain. Therefore, a facilitator must take the time to actively listen, verbalize what they hear by paraphrasing, and encourage reflection to engage speakers.

Addressing a lull. Conversations can often vary from being very engaged to disengaged. This is normal, and a few lulls are not a sign of poor facilitation. Probing questions can help advance the discussion:

- Ask if anyone has a personal experience that relates to the topic.
- See if quieter participants have anything they'd like to add.
- Reiterate another speaker's thoughts and then ask a related follow-up question to the group.
- Confirm that the framing of the question is appropriate, and if not, ask what isn't captured.

Alternatively, a lull could also indicate that people have thoughts but need time to consider them, or conversely that the conversation is addressing topics only superficially. It is also possible that an overbearing personality has sidelined other contributions, and as facilitator you should work to rebalance the conversation.

Addressing a dominating speaker. Facilitating public conversations requires navigating strong personalities. This is not something to shy away from or worry about. Rather, the goal is to help people of all backgrounds, opinions, and experience share their perspectives, and hear those of others, respectfully and equitably. Here are some practical tools to deploy to ensure contribution doesn't become unbalanced:

- Ahead of time, think about how people are placed at tables. Some events allow self-directed table selection. Other times, it could be useful to assign seating to better distribute people with different perspectives or levels of experience in public conversations.
- Rather than only rely on guided norms, facilitators can have talking 'sticks' or some other physical item. People who hold the item are given the floor to speak, which means that everyone gets an opportunity to speak (or pass). Everyone else listens.
- When conversations start to veer from the topic under discussion, the facilitator should step in to offer a redirection. A good redirection recognizes the last speaker's ideas before pointing to a new speaker or a new idea.
- If a conversation gets stuck discussing the opinions of just a few participants, try to find ways to share, and even display visually, how everyone in the group feels. This contextualizes the conversation and gives dominating speakers a cue to let other voices lead or at least refocus their contributions. **Module 4** may offer facilitation activities useful for this.

Addressing disagreements. Disagreements are not automatically a problem. In fact, we should welcome them as a natural part of bringing together diverse perspectives. As facilitators, we work to promote productive disagreements, which bring us to new ideas and opinions, and minimize destructive disagreements, which turn us away from new ideas. The first thing to consider is the facilitator's own conduct. Interrupting other speakers, even unintentionally, signals to participants that it is acceptable to do the same.

Even with a perfect facilitator, heated disagreements may still emerge. There are a number of different tactics that could be used to mitigate these and move on:

- Most ideas, even those phrased in possibly contentious ways, can contain important perspectives that can be paraphrased and reiterated conscientiously to better express the core message.
- If a specific back-and-forth has potential to become tense, you can disrupt this by bringing in new voices or new topics.
- Focus on individual experience rather than global statements. An “I...” statement is less likely to invite contentious rebuttal than a claim about the world.
- If a disagreement is crystallizing, recognize it to move beyond it. When a disagreement becomes apparent, not addressing it may worsen the situation by letting frustrations build.
- Reviewing ground rules can be helpful, although in tense circumstances participants may disagree on whether a rule was violated or not. Adjudicate these carefully, focusing on “I” statements and recognizing people’s frustrations.
- As a last resort, you may need to temporarily adjourn the conversation or rotate the membership of the table. Be sure to check in with frustrated parties to rebuild trust.

Further Reading:

- **CIVIC Guide for Addressing Challenging Issues:** <https://nifi.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/CIVIC-Curriculum-Web.pdf>
- **Two-Pager from Disagree Better:** <https://disagreebetter.us/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/You-dont-have-to-land-on-common-ground-to-find-success-in-conflict.-Sometimes-the-win-is-learning-something-new-%E2%80%93-about-the-person-the-issue-or-even-yourself.pdf>
- **NCL’s All America Conversations Toolkit:** <https://www.nationalcivicleague.org/resources/america-conversations-toolkit/>
- **The World Café Method:** <https://theworldcafe.com/key-concepts-resources/world-cafe-method/>

Example Prompts

“That’s an interesting point. How would you connect it to [the main topic]?”

Role: Redirecting

“I feel as though...”

“From *my* perspective...”

Role: De-escalating

“We’ve heard a few perspectives already. I’d like to make space for anyone who hasn’t spoken yet.”

Role: Inviting Participation

“Could you further explain what you meant by...?”

Role: Clarifying

“[Participant], you have some experience with this. What do you think about [specific idea]?”

Role: Inviting

“From what I’m hearing, you are suggesting... [idea] ... is that accurate?”

Role: Clarifying

“A few different ideas are emerging right now. Let me outline what I’ve heard...”

Role: Synthesizing

“Thank you for that contribution. There’s a lot to explore on that topic, but in the interest of time I’d like to refocus on...”

Role: Redirecting

“Let’s pause for a moment to check in on our conversational agreements. I am hearing two different concerns being surfaced. Let’s understand both before we continue.”

Role: De-escalating

Module 4

Ideation, Sense-making, & Evaluation

While open-ended discussion will make up a significant part of any public conversation, it is important to include structured, facilitated activities as well, especially when the goal of a conversation is to do more than surface participants' concerns. This module offers structured activities for generating ideas together, identifying patterns across those ideas, and then evaluating them. The final step of this process, prioritization (whether it be voting for one topic of discussion to explore or for a solution to implement), is discussed more in **Module 5**.

Actions

- ☐ **Before the conversation, align your facilitation activities with your conversational goals.** Do you want to have a deliberation or a dialogue?
 - **A dialogue leans more on ideation and sense-making.** Participants focus on sharing information more than making collective decisions. This might just be a space for people to feel heard. Try to frame a question that avoids blame or division and instead focuses on a system or process that affects people.
 - **A deliberation is more geared towards outcomes.** This means it will start with ideation and sense-making and then continue through evaluation and/or prioritization. Doing that analysis requires context, so a deliberation often includes reading or presentation materials that you should prepare beforehand.
- ☐ **Select activities and prepare materials.** Based on your goals, design a sequence of activities to unearth ideas and perspectives, understand them, and evaluate them. For most of these, you will need paper, markers, and sticky notes. For virtual and hybrid conversations, you will need other digital services.
- ☐ **During the conversation, explain the sequence of activities.** Make sure that your participants understand how the different parts of your facilitation work together.
- ☐ **Capture ideas.** At each stage of the process, be sure to note what participants are saying. If you are in-person, you can take photos after an Affinity Mapping. The themes from these activities could also be captured in general notes.

Considerations

Facilitation isn't always linear. You might assume that a conversation proceeds logically from generating ideas and making sense of them toward evaluation and prioritization. In reality, public conversations move through these tools repeatedly. A group may need to debate which topic to discuss, which often requires mapping out topics for discussion (idea generation), potentially grouping them together (sense-making), and then evaluating and selecting the one best suited to the group at hand (evaluation). Thus, all of these tools might be used before an agenda topic is even set! As a result, don't be afraid to mix these and other tools however it best suits the present moment.

Silence isn't a defect. Not all breakout groups need to be strictly conversational. We may prioritize discussion, but there are other ways to encourage and incorporate individual thinking. Once we surface these ideas, we can look for patterns as a group or record the raw ideas for later. Examples of this include 'brainwriting' or silent generation at a table, where people write down ideas individually before sharing them with a group. This allows people to think about a question first, and sometimes they are inclined to write down ideas rather than speak publicly. In other instances, the goal could be to collectively share ideas and make them visible as a group from the start.

Hybrid and virtual discussions are increasingly useful for expanding accessibility. As you implement structured facilitation activities, however, you should consider how these activities can be adapted to hybrid and virtual formats. Digital participation can be made available to those online through, for example, Mentimeter, virtual breakout rooms, and online idea generation with Miro or other free whiteboards, including some which are built into video-conferencing platforms. Digital engagement brings a variety of possibilities, such as scaling to larger groups both in-person and online, but hybrid facilitation also requires special attention to ensure that people aren't left out. You might have a co-facilitator dedicated to monitoring the online experience and addressing technical difficulties.

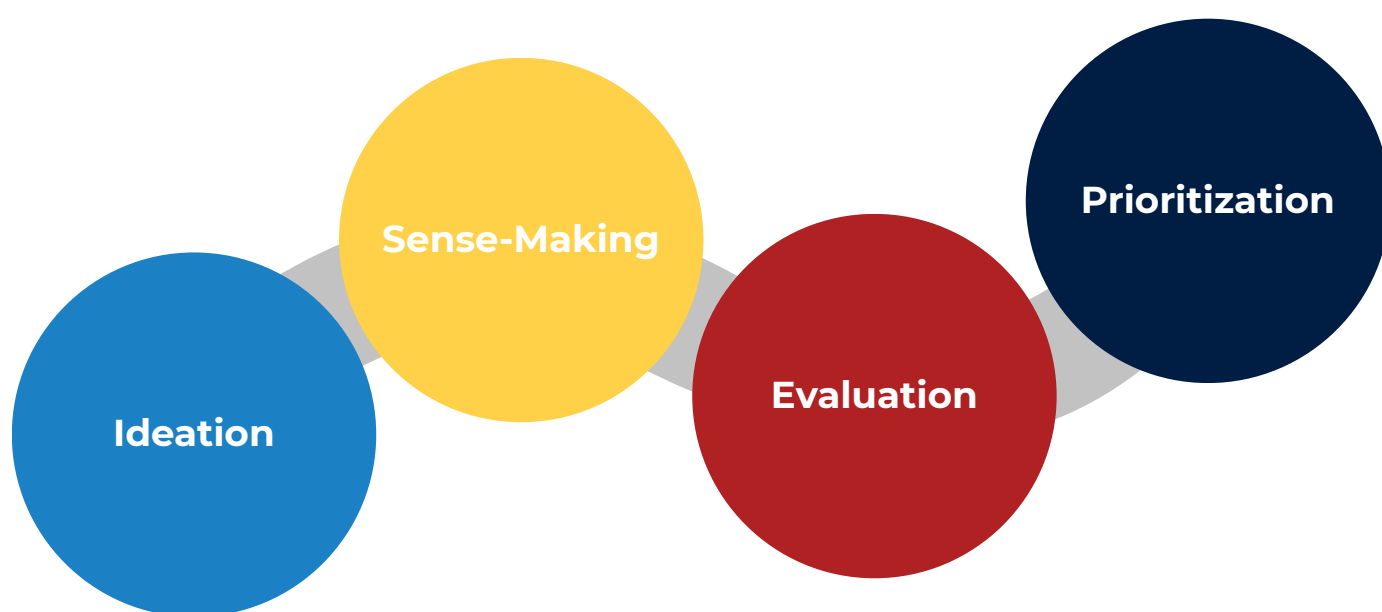
Facilitation Activities

Each of the following activities can play a specific role in a broader discussion. Consider the following goals as you select which activities to include:

- **Ideation:** Participants think broadly and share many different ideas, perspectives, and solutions that relate to the prompt.
- **Sense-making:** Participants understand the pool of ideas as a whole, recognizing themes and the relationship between ideas.
- **Evaluation:** Participants analyze individual ideas, comparing them against each other and applying criteria.

- **Prioritization:** Participants build on sense-making and evaluation to identify which ideas are most promising or have the widest support. (These activities are discussed in further detail in **Module 5**)

These goals often happen sequentially with the discussion broadening during ideation and sense-making before focusing in to evaluate specific ideas. That said, don't be afraid to change this sequence and use these and similar activities iteratively.



Further Reading:

- **Digital Facilitation Guide from CHOICE:** https://www.choiceforyouth.org/assets/Toolkits/Organizational/DigitalFacilitationGuide_V09.pdf
- **Facilitation Tool Guide from Seeds for Change:** <https://www.ices.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/7.-Facilitation-Guide.pdf>
- **Blog on Affinity Mapping from Miro:** <https://miro.com/blog/create-affinity-diagrams/>
- **Liberating Structures:** <https://www.liberatingstructures.com/>

Facilitation Activities

Brainstorming: Participants work together, either in the group or pairs, to suggest ideas together. This might yield more interesting and collaborative ideas than a brainwriting, but you will need to assign notetakers to write down the ideas for further activities.

Affinity Mapping: Participants place their ideas on a wall, but instead of observing they are asked to group ideas. It can be useful to see what groupings people identify organically. You might need to make multiple copies of the ideas or have participants work in pairs. This process of clustering related ideas makes meaning across diverse points of view.

Brainwriting: People individually and silently write out ideas on sticky notes or another medium. You can also do this digitally through a platform like Mentimeter (it offers a basic account for free). The purpose is to provide people with an avenue to think about ideas before verbalizing them.

What specific changes to community councils would make participation more meaningful, inclusive, and influential in the next 6-18 months?

Expand the formats of giving feedback to the assembly: resolution, letter, report, survey, member statements, meeting summary, meeting minutes, other, xk man 🤖	Allow more time for dialogue	council wide mailing to every house
Don't overload agendas & make more time for dialogue.	Make them more human	Using local media, news, magazines, radio Social media to share information before and after of projects and results
Participatory budgeting or micro grants	Pair an artist with each council to help them make changes.	Group partnerships with local organizations
	Teams limits	Shorter. Better focused.

Brainwriting with Mentimeter



An affinity mapping wall in progress. Photo courtesy Team Platypus, GA, NYC.

Affinity Mapping Example

Impact vs Effort Analysis: If you want to compare ideas, you can plot them on a chart. You will need one or two criteria for consideration. A common pair of criteria for evaluating solutions is impact and effort. Plotted against these two axes, it is easier to see which ideas are easy-lifts, ambitious projects, or not worth the investment.

Gallery Walk: Participants reflect on the ideas they've previously created. Take the ideas and post them on a wall or chart stand, and have people circulate around the room to consider them, then return to a table to discuss any takeaways and identify common themes across ideas.

SWOT Analysis: Useful as you narrow down to just a few ideas worth considering, you can ask what the “Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats” related to an idea or a topic.

Pros and Cons: Another tool for individual analysis is to produce a pros and cons list for an individual idea.

Module 5

Implementing Actions & Creating a Feedback Loop

Once we have many ideas, we can move from ideation to decision-making. This could take place at your meeting or potentially after if you are planning a series of conversations. In situations where there are prepared ideas or policy options, this decision-making might be the public's first engagement in a process. Regardless of where it falls in the sequence, implementing ideas and guaranteeing action are important for building trust and signalling to participants that their time is being taken seriously.

Actions

- ☐ **Before the conversation, determine the decision-making scope of the meeting.** Do the participants have the authority to make a certain decision? What decisions are they interested in making at this stage?
- ☐ **During the conversation, explain your chosen activity and what will result.** Is this a binding decision? Will it go to another vote? Is the process well understood?
- ☐ **Conduct your voting or prioritization,** record the results, and share how prescribed actions will happen and how information will be reshared to those present.

Considerations

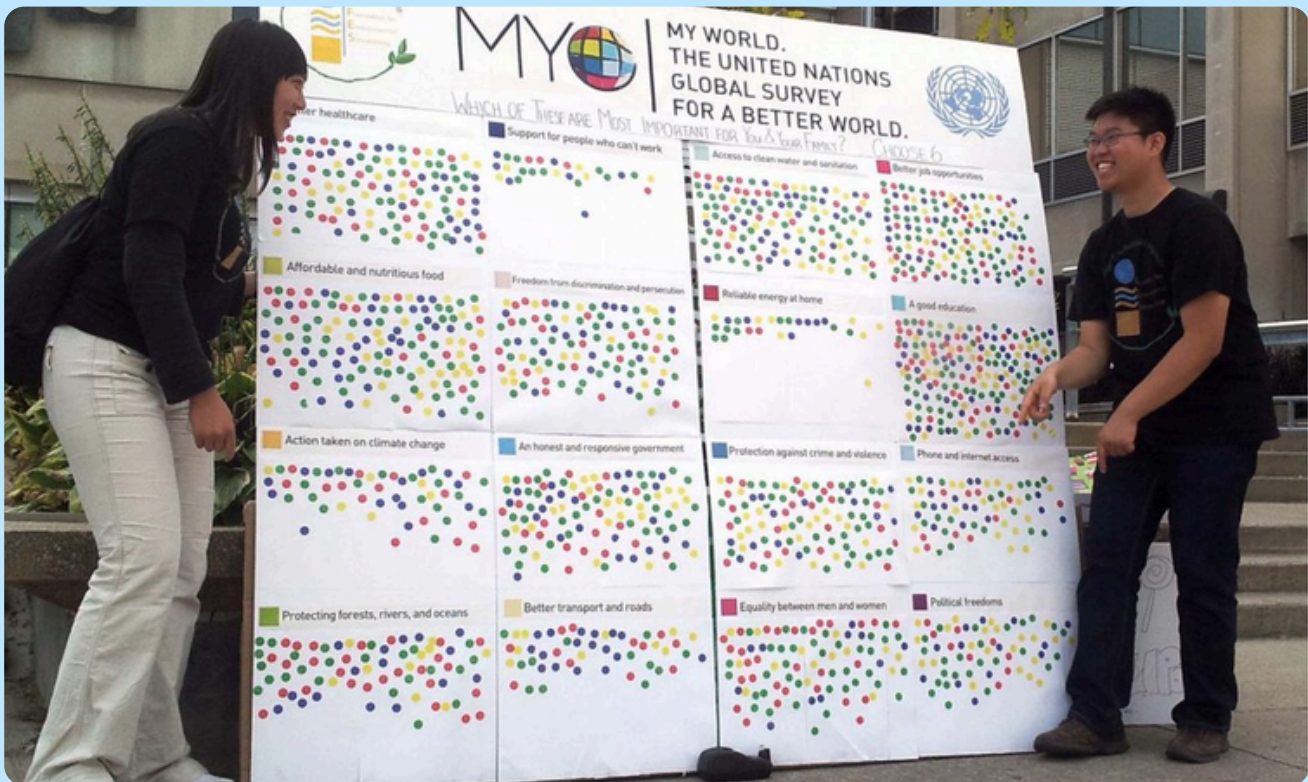
Not every major decision has to be made at one meeting. The goal of a conversation may just be to develop ideas for future consideration, clarify certain facts and themes about those ideas, articulate priorities, or agree on a process for making future decisions. It is important to understand how far your audience wants to go into a decision-making process while designing a conversation, so no one feels that the group is going “too far” or doing “too little.”

Conversely, always be prepared to facilitate a decision. Even if a major decision is not being made, you may still need voting and prioritization activities prepared. Maybe the group needs to select a topic for further study and is torn between two ideas when a consensus had been expected. Having a structured prioritization activity ready, or being able to design one transparently during the conversation, can reaffirm the legitimacy of the process.

Prepare to close the feedback loop. Regardless of how you vote or what results, take time to consider what comes next. In other words, who will carry out actions that are identified through this process? How will the public be informed about what comes next?

Voting and Prioritization Activities

- **Dot Voting:** On a large surface, place posters for each idea or option under consideration. Each participant places some number of dots or sticky notes on ideas that indicate which is best or most interesting to them.
- **Digital Tools:** Platforms like Mentimeter often have features that let participants rank ideas or proposals and then produce a shared list from those rankings.
- **Voting with Your Feet:** Another physically interactive approach is to have people stand in different parts of a room to indicate a preference. This may also be an interesting segue into a new round of breakout discussions.



Dot-voting in practice

Further Reading:

- **How to do Dot Voting, from Dotmocracy:** <https://dotmocracy.org/dot-voting/>
- **Consent-based Decision Making from Sociocracy:** <https://www.sociocracyforall.org/consent-decision-making/>

Module 6

Using Creative Tools to Make Civic Meetings Joyous

Artistic interventions have a track record as part of public organizing and policy meetings. From Legislative Theater to Avoidance Mapping, these tools can humanize the deliberation process and make meetings more fun and effective for more people.

Have a Rationale

Perfect City's work starts from the belief that we are experts at policy through our lived experience, and artistic interventions help leaders tap our expertise more readily. Democratic participation gets better when our innate creativity is engaged. A focused artistic intervention like participatory theater, creative mapping, or a simple choreographic structure that gauges a community's feelings about an issue on the agenda, can bring people into dialogue in a new and productive way.

Creative tools can diffuse tension, embody the lived experience of a policy or program that's being discussed, or help us learn a different perspectives on a topic. They can also be deployed to bring young people into a civic process by uplifting their lived experience as policy knowledge.

Considerations

Not every meeting needs to involve a creative element. Some meetings are simply about voting or a short deliberation that culminates a longer process, and efficiency may be more important than artistry.

Creative tools should be easy to learn, adaptable to different bodies and abilities and fun.

These tools should be opt-in or out, so that people feel encouraged but not forced to take part.

Think about when in a meeting a creative intervention will be most effective. As a break from a long study session? As an ice-breaker at the beginning? As a way to welcome in new voices to an ongoing deliberation?

The logo for Perfect City, featuring the words "Perfect" and "City" in a bold, dark teal sans-serif font. The word "Perfect" is on the top line and "City" is on the bottom line. A small orange circle is positioned above the letter "i" in "City". The logo is set against a light beige, textured background that resembles a watercolor wash.

Activities

Perfect City offers several different exercises, each with their own role in promoting dynamic and inclusive meetings:

Legislative Theater’s Walk/Stop Exercise

This is a fun way to get everyone up, moving, and playfully responding to instructions. It’s especially helpful for groups that may need to loosen up a bit. You don’t need to be smooth about this. You can read the instructions below and have participants follow the prompts even if things get a little jumbled.

Created by Theater of the Oppressed, which has been using theatrical tools to help communities organize and change policy for decades, this short, on-your-feet exercise shows how different people experience rules and policies.

1. Explain to the group that this exercise involves moving around the space.
2. Have those who can stand do so.
3. Give them the simple instruction: when the facilitator says “walk,” people should walk around the room. When they hear “stop,” they stop. Simple, right?
4. Next, reverse the commands: when folks hear “walk,” they stop, and when they hear “stop,” they walk.
5. Now add a second pair of commands: when the facilitator says “touch the floor,” participants touch the floor and stand back up. When they hear “clap,” they clap.
6. Make sure they keep the original commands — “walk” and “stop” — reversed!
7. After you’ve tried “touch the floor” and “clap” in the correct order, reverse those, too. Give them a chance to try both sets reversed.
8. Now add a third set: “say your name” and “yell.” Have them do that correctly while keeping the first two sets reversed.
9. Then, yes, you got it: reverse the final two commands.

In a debrief, get people’s experiences. Usually, it is awkward, silly, fun, and confusing all at once. You may want to point out that this is sometimes what politics or bureaucracy feels like to people who aren’t steeped in the jargon. It’s confusing, it changes a lot, and it doesn’t always make sense. At the same time, doing this exercise together puts everyone in the same boat and lets us take ourselves less seriously.

Mapping as Civic Information

Perfect City uses several different mapping exercises to help residents illustrate their lived experience of policy. Each of these maps helps start a conversation and surface the different ways people experience and use local spaces and facilities. It can also be a way to identify key issues within a block, neighborhood, or city. For this one, you’ll need paper, pens, pencils, and markers. Easel paper is a bonus, but not a must-have.

- 1. Mapping likes and dislikes** — This is especially great with kids, but applicable to any age. Have participants draw a map of their trip from home to school or work. Ask them to point out what they like and don't like on their journey. Maybe it's a new bus lane, an elevator that doesn't work, a playground that needs repair, or a hazardous intersection. With kids, you can use these likes and dislikes to point out that each corresponds to a particular policy decision or priority. With adults, you can use this mapping exercise to find out which issues matter most and how the group might work together on shared challenges or opportunities.
- 2. Avoidance Mapping** — Perfect City's Avoidance Mapping helps surface shared concerns and points of view around a specific space or policy. Have participants draw maps of what they try to avoid in their daily travels through their city or neighborhood. Remind them that mapping is a skill we all have and that the goal is not visual elegance but information. The space can be indoors or out, public or private. After 10–15 minutes of mapping, lead a facilitated dialogue about how we experience some of the same spaces differently depending on disability status, race, gender, and age. If you have easel paper handy, have participants do a “world café” tour of each other's maps and use the paper to write solutions and responses. This collection of maps and responses can be photographed and sent back to policymakers, planners, and designers.

Neighborhood Tours

Neighborhood/community tours can take a meeting out of the usual rooms where they most often occur and put participants in a more creative frame of mind to tackle shared challenges and opportunities.

Ask a longtime resident — or, alternatively, a member of an impacted or marginalized community — to lead a tour of a specific area. Together, you can point out sites that need attention, places of belonging and potential, and places that are underutilized.

From there, when you return to the meeting space, you can facilitate a discussion about what kinds of solutions might be available. Could a change in zoning that matches the changes a neighborhood is experiencing in its use help? What about installing lights or benches along a specific pathway? Make sure you or another community member “scribes” the responses that come up.

Peer-to-Peer Interviews

This is a simple way to help people articulate their policy priorities to each other and then to a larger group. Ideally, you'll have one participant also act as timekeeper, but you can also do that yourself.

1. Ask folks to pair up, ideally with someone they know less well or did not come in with.
2. Explain that these will be timed conversations, with one person speaking and the other listening for a specific amount of time. Anywhere between 3 and 12 minutes tends to work. The listener can ask clarifying questions but cannot comment on what their partner has said.
3. Prompt them with 1–3 points to speak about, pertaining to the local issue at hand in the meeting.

4. At the end, the listener reflects back what they have understood, and the pair/trio writes down a list of points that were made.
5. Switch it up, so that the listener becomes the speaker and vice versa.
6. Have pairs share out to the larger group what they learned from each other.

NOTE: This can work in trios, too. With a mix of pairs and trios, you'll have a bit more timekeeping work, dividing the overall interview time into three rather than two parts.

Further Reading / Additional Resources

- **Intro to Legislative Theater:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHeRD-rr6>
- **Wildcard Workbook for Facilitating Theater of the Oppressed:** <https://www.tonyc.nyc/wildcardworkbook>
- **The City We Make Together — How theater and civic participation worked in five U.S. cities:** <https://thecitywemaketgether.com>
- **Perfect City — Tools and programs for creative civic action:** <https://perfectcity.org/>
- **The People Act: Legislative Theater — Case studies, primers, and networks of practitioners doing Theater of the Oppressed work:** <https://www.thepeopleact.org>
- **What Do You Avoid? Where Do You Belong? — Perfect City case study in avoidance mapping from Urban Omnibus.** <https://urbanomnibus.net/2017/07/what-do-you-avoid-where-do-you-belong/>