

BRIGHT SPOTS IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Case Studies of U.S. Communities Creating Greater Civic Participation from the Bottom Up



Photo credit: Knight Foundation



By Christopher Hoene, Christopher Kingsley and Matthew Leighninger

April 2013

ABOUT THE PROJECT

In partnership with the The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the National League of Cities commenced a project on community engagement bright spots in the fall of 2011. The purposes of the project were to:

- Identify promising practices and models in communities that are successfully engaging citizens in local problem-solving efforts
- Develop a series of city examples and case studies highlighting key elements and strategies embedded in these local initiatives

In the initial phase of the project, drawing on the experience of the Knight Foundation in communities where it is engaged as well as on the National League of Cities' prior work with city leaders, we conducted phone interviews with community leaders. The National League of Cities then followed with in-depth scans of initiatives that showed particular promise in 14 communities across our nation of varying size and character. The types of efforts we looked to identify in these community scans met one or more of the following the criteria:

- Efforts that employ new tools and strategies such as technology-based tools
- Efforts with a broader reach that engaged diverse segments of the community
- Efforts that have had notable successes and outcomes
- Efforts that evolved to employ different strategies and tools sustainably over time

In the second phase of the project, in consultation with the Knight Foundation, the National League of Cities selected initiatives in four communities for in-depth case studies, including further research, interviews, and site visits. The four communities selected were Austin, Chicago, Detroit and Philadelphia.

Throughout the project, our working definition of community engagement draws upon the Knight Foundation's Engaged Community Strategy, which aims to sustain healthy communities in a democracy, and is informed by the past work of the National League of Cities on democratic governance, civic engagement and public participation. Our investigation included any efforts in the selected cities that seek to create, strengthen and sustain community engagement by individuals from the bottom up.

The Knight Foundation's Engaged Community Strategy fosters initiatives that develop in people a strong sense of belonging and caring, timely access to relevant information, the ability to understand that information, and the motivation, opportunity and skills to take sustainable action on a range of issues throughout their lives. The Knight Foundation fosters innovative approaches to increasing engagement skills in the community development field. The foundation funds programs that use technology to foster engagement, and supports individuals as agents for engagement, with a focus on youth leadership, social entrepreneurs and local institutions.

CONTENTS

4	Introduction
11	Bright spots in community engagement
25	Our four case studies
28	Detroit
32	Philadelphia
38	Chicago
42	Austin
47	Conclusion

INTRODUCTION

Communities across our nation are experimenting with new ways to engage citizens in the decisions made by civic leaders from the public, private and non-profit sectors, working sometimes together and sometimes at cross purposes. Ultimately, success at making democracy work and sustaining healthy communities requires engaged individuals, organizations, and institutions. Across our country, community engagement bright spots are emerging. These initiatives foster a sense of attachment, expand access to information and resources, and create opportunities for citizens to play more active roles in setting priorities, addressing issues, and planning the longer-term sustainability of their communities.

TABLE ONE

OUR SELECTED 14 COMMUNITIES AND FOUR FINALISTS

Communities selected for analysis from the networks of the Knight Foundation and National League of Cities

Knight Communities	NLC-Selected Communities
Akron, Ohio	Austin, Texas
Charlotte, North Carolina	Boston, Massachusetts
Detroit, Michigan	Chicago, Illinois (49th Ward)
Macon, Georgia	Decatur, Georgia
St. Paul, Minnesota	Hampton, Virginia
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	Hartford, Connecticut
San Jose, California	Richmond, Virginia

*Bolded communities are those selected for in-depth case studies.

The National League of Cities, working with The John S. and James L Knight Foundation, selected 14 communities that the two institutions are engaged with to explore how well or poorly some of these experiments are faring today. This analysis then focused more closely on four communities—Detroit, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Austin—to document the lessons learned and the challenges ahead. (see Table 1)

We are pleased to present the results from our scan of community engagement bright spots, drawing specifically on efforts or movements underway in communities that demonstrate the potential of inclusive, intensive community engagement. These examples highlight bold new pockets of energy emerging in different sectors that challenge conventional standards of practice, and

demonstrate the use of new tools and strategies to engage people in building community and solving problems. These examples also illustrate some common challenges confronting community engagement efforts.

Detroit offers the most potent contrast between the actions of private and non-profit civic entrepreneurs to rebuild and revitalize parts of the city’s once thriving downtown and the lack of engagement of these activists with the elected political leaders of the city. “To understand what is happening in Detroit, you have to get comfortable with innovation at the micro-, micro-level,” says Dan Gilmartin of the Michigan Municipal League. “It’s gritty and it’s happening almost in spite of institutions in every sector that are broken or ineffective at fostering change.”

Philadelphia does not lack for political leadership, but what once was absent were effective technology tools to bring those public officials together with private and non-profit civic leaders for meaningful community engagement. Today, a high-tech “civic fusion” is taking



place, funded by several key foundations and companies building online communities to expand community participation. Says Alex Hillman, the co-founder of a multi-participatory civic co-working space called Indy Hall, “My belief is that if you keep helping these good guys [in City Hall] do good work, their colleagues will need to learn the value of partnering with engaged citizens.”

Yet Hillman and others in the city leading these online efforts are aware that online outreach can only go so far in reaching citizens who lack the means or the capabilities to engage in this way.

The political leaders of Chicago’s 49th Ward, which boasts a thoroughly diversified mix of Americans of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, are working through these same political engagement hurdles the old-fashioned way—beating the pavement to boost citizen participation. Joe Moore, an Alderman in the 49th Ward, is drawing more and more of his constituents into a so-called “participatory budgeting” process, in which community members themselves decide how to spend a significant portion of the ward’s annual budget. “The people now who are really involved and engaged in the leadership process and community groups are not the usual suspects,” Moore explains. “Overwhelmingly, the people involved in this process are new people.” Intriguingly, though, the challenge Moore and his ward face is one of technology, as it lacks the online tools that Philadelphia is creating.

Knight Arts Challenge Detroit:
Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History: The Charles H. Wright will use the arts to foster an interest in reading by weaving interactive cultural experiences throughout the museum’s Children’s Book Fair. Photo credit: Knight Foundation

SUCCESSFUL HALLMARKS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Lessons learned from our analysis of efforts in 14 communities around our nation

- The use of new tools and strategies
- The ability to reach a broad spectrum of people
- Notable positive outcomes
- Sustained efforts and structures

Then there's Austin. "This is a city that prides itself on, and has a long history of, successful community engagement," explains Larry Schooler, a community engagement consultant with the City of Austin. "There is an underlying culture of engagement that is a part of how the city is governed. What we designed was not your father's comprehensive planning process." Yet planning and long-term engagement are two different processes, our analysis of the city revealed. Moving to a sustained system of engagement beyond the planning process is something Austin could learn from Chicago's 49th Ward and Philadelphia.

So what positive outcomes do the civic engagement efforts of these four communities and the 10 others examined more briefly in this report have in common? And what can they learn from each other given the common challenges they face? All four of the detailed case studies featured in this report should be exciting examples for advocates of engagement. They demonstrate, to varying degrees, the four aspects of successful engagement (see box on page 5).

The 14 cases also reflect the diversity of the leaders in this field. Across the country, community engagement initiatives have been initiated by all sorts of people, including grassroots organizers, funders, technologists, elected officials, and city staff. With the exception of Philadelphia, in each of the four detailed cases examined in our report, one sector of leadership emerged as the animating force behind the engagement work and was at most only moderately successful in attracting support from other sectors.

Macon, Georgia: College Hill Corridor Soap Box Derby, April 2013. Photo credit: flickr.com/merceradmissions





It is tempting to imagine a hypothetical community where Philadelphia technologists work hand-in-hand with Detroit civic entrepreneurs and Austin city staffers—and where Joe Moore of Chicago’s 49th Ward is the mayor. But because each sector of engagement leadership brings its own unique incentives and motivations to the work, how each set of leaders defines engagement is different. For some, engagement means improving access to government data—and using that data in ways that improve quality of life. For others, engagement means giving large numbers of people the chance to shape government priorities; it can also mean tapping into the energy and creativity of citizens to spur economic development.

Philadelphia: Indy Hall. Photo credit: flickr.com/Kara La Fleur

What we learned

In the main pages of this report we will detail these successes and challenges, but briefly here we can summarize findings. We learned that there is energy—a (new) frontier spirit—for change in these communities. Importantly, this new energy is moving forward undeterred by economic stagnation, political polarization, and institutional sclerosis, all of which

in some form or another haunt the communities we examined for this report. And we learned that the best examples of community engagement refute common criticisms—that they fail to change policy and cannot reconcile community divisions. Across our scan of 14 communities we found this simply not to be the case.

We learned, too, that the more networks and representatives from all facets of the community are invited to the mix, the greater the benefits to community well-being. Drawing a larger and more diverse range of engaged citizens into community participation requires new tools and strategies, particularly those that tap the power of technology, to have the transformative impact we document in this report.



Finally, we learned more about the relationship between community engagement and economic vitality. What we saw lends credence to the claim that engagement generates opportunity by creating networks of individuals, organizations, and institutions committed to development and sustainability.

Our analysis also illustrates some common challenges and questions confronting community engagement efforts. A challenge common to nearly all the cases is how to achieve scale—by expanding upon

San Jose: Photo credit: Somos Mayfair

the highlighted bright spots, creating networks of micro-level efforts focused on shared learning and replication, or building the successes into reshaped institutions and systems. One interviewee argued that examining this kind of bottom up community participation work so far is akin to “shining a magnifying glass on specks.”

Another challenge has to do with the ability of community engagement efforts to address and reconcile deep community divisions and reach supposedly “hard-to-reach” communities within these cities. Indeed, the question of how to address race, ethnicity and class is a perennial question for community engagement efforts. While the efforts profiled in

this paper all employed new tools and strategies, including online and technology-focused tools, there appears to be a need for increased sophistication in understanding how best to mix the available tools to broaden and deepen community engagement.

Lastly, an assessment of the sustainability of the efforts we profile in the pages that follow leads to optimism about the energy and commitment of current leadership, but raises questions about the survival of these efforts if and when transitions in leadership occur. Do the initiatives survive, and if so, where do they live? How will they be adopted and adapted in other places, so that the learning and innovation will continue to grow?

We believe there are indeed many bright spots in the communities we've examined. The question of how engagement can be extended, strengthened, and sustained will guide our efforts in the next phases of this work, and we hope it will guide the efforts of others in helping to foster engaged communities.



BRIGHT SPOTS IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Lessons from 14 U.S. Cities

In the 14 cities scanned by the National League of Cities, a number of “bright spot” initiatives demonstrate the potential of inclusive, intensive community engagement. The best of these examples counter some of the common criticisms of democratic governance efforts—that they fail to impact policy, that they cannot reconcile deep community divisions, and that they do not involve supposedly “hard-to-reach” populations.

These community scans also illustrate some common challenges confronting community engagement, such as a lack of shared learning and coordination across different initiatives, the difficulty of sustaining energy and involvement over time, and a general ‘cloudiness’ about the big picture of community engagement in the city, and how it might be improved. The scans focused on four aspects of community engagement:

- The use of new tools and strategies
- The ability to reach a broad spectrum of people, including those not typically “engaged”
- Notable successes and outcomes
- Sustainable efforts to use a range of strategies

Let’s briefly consider each of these four aspects of community engagement in turn before turning to brief descriptions of the 14 communities we scanned and then delving more deeply into our four community case studies of Detroit, Philadelphia, Chicago and Austin.

Most of the cities we scanned had experimented with new tools for engagement, using online technologies in particular. In places such as Austin, Texas, Charlotte, N.C., Hampton, Va., and Decatur, Ga., these tools were being used in the service of broader initiatives to engage large numbers of people, while in Philadelphia the main thrust was to engage local ‘technologists’ in generating technology-based solutions to city problems.

Another new strategy evident in Akron, Ohio and St. Paul., Minn. (not completely new, perhaps, but unusual in contemporary community engagement) was the redevelopment and use of public buildings as hubs for engagement. In Akron, for example, the city’s public schools were used as Community Learning Center hubs for a cluster of civic engagement work in education, workforce development, and community outreach. In St. Paul, the city’s district council meeting rooms were used to engage citizens in the civic planning of a central corridor development strategy linking the city with nearby Minneapolis.

Ability to reach a broad spectrum of people, including those not typically engaged

Three cities were particularly distinguished in their ability to engage large numbers of residents. Decatur has involved 10 percent of its population, not in superficial ways such as opinion surveys but in intensive small-group discussions of public issues. The participatory budgeting process in Chicago's diverse 49th Ward, while not a citywide effort, has also engaged a very high percentage of residents. Austin's turnout was smaller per capita, but the more than 25,000 participants in a variety of engagement opportunities is also impressive.

These cities, alongside Boston, St. Paul, and Hampton, also demonstrated the potential of community engagement initiatives to reach supposedly "hard-to-reach" populations, such as low-income communities. The work in St. Paul in particular stands out in this regard, but other cities targeted other groups of citizens, such as young people (for which Hampton has a well-deserved reputation), and recent immigrants (Boston is the leading example.)

Notable successes and outcomes

Among the 14 cities scanned, the community engagement work had taken on some of the main challenges cities typically face. These challenges include public finance, transportation, downtown/waterfront development, immigrant integration, land use, race and difference, and cross-sector (public, private, non-profit, education, and philanthropic) collaboration, as well as overall strategic plans and visions.

In some of those cases, such as Philadelphia's Delaware River campaign and the Central Corridor Strategy in St. Paul, the initiative seemed to break through a policy logjam among highly entrenched groups. In others, the input of large numbers of citizens seemed to have a notable impact on policy, either in an advisory capacity ("I Value" in Hampton) or because local officials had invited residents to actually make the policy decisions (Chicago's 49th Ward). In still other cities, initiatives had successfully generated volunteer efforts to solve public problems, or fostered problem-solving collaborations between citizens and public employees.

Sustainable efforts that use a range of strategies

A number of initiatives, including "Speak Up Austin," "Crossroads Charlotte," and "I Value" in Hampton successfully employed a wide range of tools and strategies to give citizens different ways to get involved. There were also many initiatives that were more limited, including efforts that utilized only face-to-face methods, and ones that offered only online opportunities. Very few of these initiatives had been sustained over a long period of time; most of them were focused on a particular issue or decision and not intended to provide engagement opportunities over the long haul. One structure that

was intended to last, the “Strong Neighborhoods” network in San Jose, has been partially dismantled after the state recently defunded the city’s Redevelopment Authority.

While most of these cities had experienced more than one engagement initiative, a recurring observation was that there often seemed to be very little connection across different efforts. Most efforts seemed to be owned exclusively by a single institution, such as local government, a school system, or a community organizing group. In many cities, the leaders, funders and organizers of different projects did not seem to have even spoken with one another, let alone learned from one another or worked together. So while many of these communities have had successful experiences with community engagement, the work seems to have emerged in a disjointed, piecemeal way, with each project prompted by a single compelling issue or controversy.

In summary, there are indeed many bright spots in the 14 cities, with some brighter than others. Questions of how engagement can be extended, strengthened, and sustained are common to all of the communities and efforts summarized below, although each community applied these strategies in different ways to address very different community engagement challenges. (see Table 2)

Let’s now turn to our swift examinations of our 14 targeted communities before looking in detail at our four community case studies.

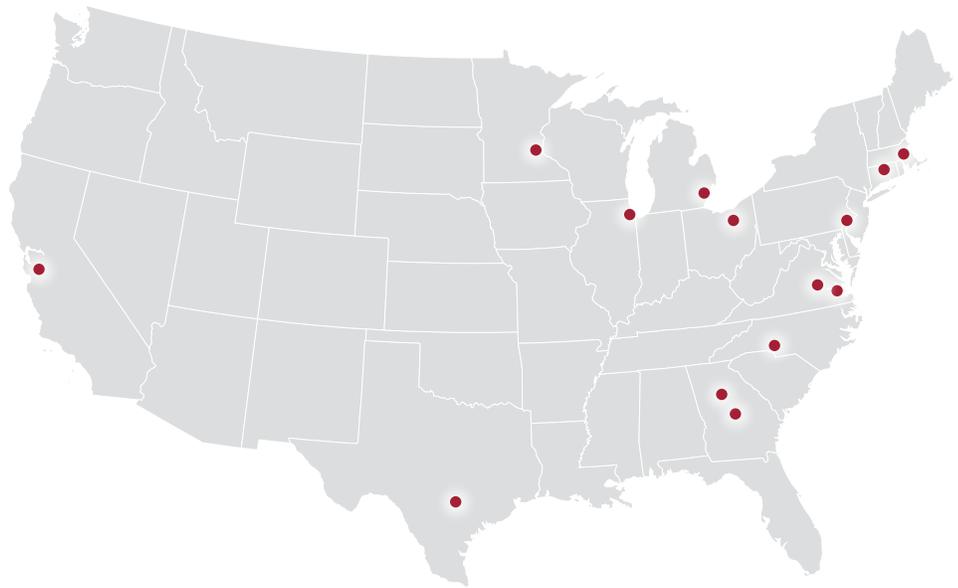


TABLE TWO

14 UNIQUE BRIGHT SPOTS

Cities and their actions

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Reclaiming the waterfront and recreating a better city through technology

St. Paul, Minnesota

Redeveloping the city’s central corridor through community engagement

Austin, Texas

Imagining Austin’s future

Boston, Massachusetts

Welcoming new Americans

Charlotte, North Carolina

Increasing social capital through Crossroads Charlotte

Chicago, Illinois

Participatory budgeting in the 49th Ward

Hampton, Virginia

I Value Program builds on two decades of community engagement leadership

Richmond, Virginia

Promoting civility in the public square

Hartford, Connecticut

Investing in parents as community champions

Macon, Georgia

Civic revitalization in the College Hill Corridor

Decatur, Georgia

A decade-long effort to engage residents in strategic planning

San Jose, California

Leading through neighborhood-based initiatives

Akron, Ohio

Revitalizing schools and neighborhoods

Detroit, Michigan

Fostering innovation through social entrepreneurship

Philadelphia

Reclaiming the waterfront and recreating a better city through technology

At least two strains of compelling work around community engagement are present in Philadelphia, one of which played a role in transforming the city's planning and land-use policy and another that is emerging out of Philadelphia's entrepreneurial technology community. Both have been developed through partnership between the city government, university and foundation resources, and civil society.



Philadelphia: Indy Hall
Photo credit: flickr.com/
alexknowshtml

The more established of the two is the civic campaign for the Delaware River, which spanned two mayoral administrations and transformed an essentially corrupt and transactional municipal planning system into a broadly participatory process that resulted in an action plan for reclaiming Philadelphia's primary waterfront. This process reinvigorated land-use debates and fueled the reform of two city commissions, led to the creation of a new comprehensive plan and sparked ongoing progress toward a more rational and effective approach to redevelopment.

More recently, as Philadelphia's "brain drain" has begun to reverse, a civically-minded tech community has coalesced around a structure provided by the city, area universities and several foundations to pursue what the news organization Technically Philly refers to as "a better Philadelphia through technology." This movement has volunteers both in and out of government; shared workspaces in Center City Philadelphia; an online press outlet, TechnicallyPhilly.org; and several annual events and competitions, including the exponentially growing Philly Tech Week. Initiatives such as OpenDataPhilly and ChangeByUs represent early successes. And the growing strength of these public/private relationships was a factor in the award of \$20 million of broadband stimulus to bring high-tech resources to low-income communities in Philadelphia through the Freedom Rings project.

St. Paul, Minnesota

Redeveloping the city's central corridor through community engagement

St. Paul's Central Corridor Development Strategy is a city-led, civic minded planning initiative launched by St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman to address potential land use, economic and social development impacts of the construction of the region's second Light Rail Transit line. The track will link the downtowns of Minneapolis and St. Paul, primarily following a path along a major transportation thoroughfare within St. Paul. The project cedes major planning and decision making authority for development along the corridor,

including building types, streetscapes and open spaces, to the affected communities.

Two task forces were created by the city consisting of 18 to 20 representatives of area residents, businesses and communities of color to frame and guide dozens of individual decisions that will be made in the corridor over this decade. Community representatives met over a period of nine months, using focus group discussions, public open houses, presentations and the city's system of District Councils to gather diverse community input. Deliberative outreach efforts were made to include citizens typically underrepresented at these types of civic forums, including Hmong and Latino residents. The process resulted in a four-section *Central Corridor Development Strategy* that casts the corridor as the future home of stronger businesses, more vibrant neighborhoods and more beautiful urban spaces.



St. Paul: Photo credit: Knight Foundation

Austin Imagining Austin's future

Imagine Austin is the City of Austin's comprehensive plan. The goals are to define a vision and framework for how residents want the city to grow and develop. A \$1.3 million budget was allocated to drive large public meetings and deliberative processes for a three-year period that started in 2009. The goals of the planning process were public participation, sustainability and implementation.

The city council appointed a diverse group of citizens to serve on the task force. The information and outreach strategies included technology tools, bi-lingual gatherings, special events to attract youth and young families and small gatherings called Meetings-in-a-Box, where table leaders distributed fact sheets and gathered feedback from residents. During Speak Week, an event designed to complement the traditional community forum, informational meetings were held in 30 to 40 locations around the city.

The outreach strategies were considered successful for several reasons. The Citizens Taskforce members, city staff and city council were committed to the process and the outreach effort. The school system agreed to assist by allowing flyers and newsletters from the city to be distributed in take home packets. A key outreach strategy was to go to where people were already gathering, such as PTA meetings, civic clubs and recreational outings. A high level of intra-agency cooperation occurred among city staff members and a diverse assortment of stakeholders who bought in to the process and encouraged participation. More than 25,000 residents provided input, and the plan was adopted in June 2012.

Boston

Welcoming new Americans

Boston: Old state house. Photo credit: Steve Minor



The Mayor's Office of New Bostonians is a unique entity that convenes city officials and staff, businesses, foundations and the community in partnerships to engage new immigrants. The office has a 14-year track record of leveraging significant resources to provide immigrants with better access to city leaders and improved services from government. It

also provides an important platform for celebrating the contribution of immigrants to the economy and culture of the city.

Selected results include an 11-point Immigrants Agenda, hundreds of free immigration-related legal consultations each year, and Boston's improved participation rate in the 2010 Census. The program also resulted in thousands of new voters, and an "English for New Bostonians" program that has grown to encompass 26 programs, a \$1.3 million budget and more than a thousand participants each year.

Charlotte

Increasing social capital through Crossroads Charlotte

Crossroads Charlotte (funded by the Knight Foundation) is a major collaborative civic project designed to increase social capital. Crossroads Charlotte encourages corporate and civic leaders to examine four plausible scenarios of the city's future and craft steps that would steer the community toward better outcomes. Each story paints a vivid picture of what Charlotte could look like in the year 2015 and starts a civic dialogue about ways to become a more inclusive and trusting community. As a result of this and other community initiatives, some 30 organizations—representing the corporate, service, non-profit and government sectors—have undertaken projects or programs to address issues of access, inclusion and equity.

There are other successes to point to in Charlotte in terms of community engagement. Since 1969, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Community Relations Committee has served as an integral part of the human relations support system for the City of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. Committee staff works with a committee of 45 citizens to gain insight on Charlotte's continually changing inter-group relations issues. Members are trained to provide community mediation, facilitation of community dialogues and training in the areas of diversity, conflict resolution and to bring communities together to work with public and elected officials. The city also established a citizens' academy



and has used technology to engage youth to blog about school board meetings. Annually, approximately 18,000 citizens participate in or are impacted by various programs and activities of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Community Relations Committee.

Charlotte: Crossroads Charlotte's Project L.I.F.T.
Photo credit: Crossroads Charlotte

Chicago

Participatory budgeting in the 49th Ward

Starting in 2010, Alderman Joe Moore began using a participatory budgeting strategy to determine how to prioritize and spend \$1.3 million in local infrastructure funds. The participatory budgeting process was conducted primarily through a range of community meetings—educational meetings in each of the Ward's eight geographic sections, followed by the creation of committees with team leaders for specific topic areas such as parks, arts, and streets. These committees met and deliberated for six months. Ward-wide assemblies were then held where each committee presented their proposal ideas, received public feedback and selected a final list of projects to be placed on a ballot. The ballot was voted upon in April 2010, with the projects receiving the most votes going forward until the \$1.3 million was exhausted.

The experiment engaged a much broader and diverse community in governing and made extensive use of Alderman Moore’s website to describe and update progress. In total, Alderman Moore estimates the required resources in staff time and costs were approximated \$100,000, but the commitment of resources was justified by the community buy-in and support for the projects. The experiment was deemed so successful that it was used again in 2011 and 2012. Several other Chicago Aldermen are now considering using the process, and plans are in the works for participatory budgeting projects to be launched in New York City. Alderman Moore commented that “overwhelmingly, the people involved in this process are new people and that has just been terrific to see.”

Hampton, Virginia

I Value Program builds on two decades of community engagement leadership

The City of Hampton has a two decades-plus history of focused community engagement efforts, most notably for youth engagement and neighborhood-based engagement, including neighborhood divisions, a neighborhood “college” (an introduction to city government) and neighborhood leadership academies. The latest iteration of the city’s work is its I Value program. Faced with significant budget shortfalls over the past two years that required cuts in key services and/or increases in revenues, the city launched its I Value program to gauge the priorities of the public. The city used a multi-channel approach, including traditional meetings, online chats, Facebook and outreach to other community meetings (PTAs, Kiwanis, civic orgs, athletic leagues, and the YMCA) to outline the choices facing the city and engage the community in advising the city about those choices.

The city also used instant polling technology to convene and obtain immediate input from 400 to 500 community members about core city services in terms of performance and investment and the need for further investment. The result was community buy-in (60 to 70 percent community support) for a set of service cuts and tax increases that the city implemented as a result of the process. Along the way, the city also learned that certain

Hampton: Street fair

Photo credit: flickr.com/rockman13



services were viewed as more critical than they had originally thought, among them tourism, economic development, libraries, and the city's Healthy Start program for at-risk mothers. The I Value program was expanded to include a citizen survey in 2012, and is now in its fourth year.

Richmond, Virginia

Promoting civility in the public square

The *Richmond Times-Dispatch's* Public Square is a series of periodic community conversations held throughout the year on a variety of issues. Starting in 2005, the newspaper's publisher, Tom Silvestri, developed the Public Square to address an internal need at the newspaper to be more open and accessible to the community and an external need for more civil, thoughtful and less divisive conversations on public issues. Discussions have focused on such topics as crime, affordable housing, mental health, immigration, public schools and lighter issues such as celebrity behavior. Strategic marketing and outreach efforts are implemented to bring in diverse and interactive audiences, and live broadcasts, video and podcasts are made available on the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* website for those not able to attend.



Richmond: The *Richmond Times-Dispatch's* Public Square
Photo credit: *Richmond Times-Dispatch*

The Public Square is also an important means to connect the community's voice with public officials. Richmond Mayor Dwight Jones delivered his state of the city address during one Public Square, and many city officials attend the forums on their own time to hear feedback from residents on the quality of municipal services. To date, the Public Square has held 38 community conversations with attendance typically reaching 75-100 individuals. The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* continues to get good feedback from the community and is looking forward to continuing the dialogue for years to come.

Hartford, Connecticut

Investing in parents as community champions

Hartford's Parent Leadership Training Institute is a 20-week civic leadership curriculum that invests in parents as champions for their children and active participants in the policy and process debates that affect them. The 20-week course includes classes, field activities and an independent community project. The training has been offered as part of a wider *Family Civics Initiative* in Hartford since 2010, supported by both the Connecticut Children's Commission and the Hartford Foundation, and managed by the city's Office for Young Children.



Macon: College Hill Corridor
Photo credit: College Hill Alliance

The results of the initiative are consistent with those of other Parent Leadership Training Institute programs in Connecticut, according to an evaluation in 2009 by RMC Corporation. The evaluation found that graduates of the training are approximately twice as likely to report taking action to solve community problems and contacting elected officials. The community projects undertaken and sustained by institute alumni are an important contribution to the civic infrastructure of Hartford and other Connecticut cities and towns.

Macon, Georgia

Civic revitalization in the College Hill Corridor

The launch of the College Hill Corridor initiative in 2007 offered new opportunities for residents to be involved in the physical, economic and civic revitalization of the neighborhoods surrounding Mercer University. First proposed by a small group of students as part of a capstone project, the university president took a leadership role and with financial support from the Knight Foundation, launched a multi-sector redevelopment planning process involving the university, city, local businesses and neighborhood residents. This initiative led to new and rehabilitated housing through a partnership with Historic Macon, a down payment assistance program, and the new KITE (knowledge, innovation, technology and entrepreneurship) economic development strategy.

At the same time, the “Knight Neighborhood Challenge” offers grants (from \$450 to

\$100,000) to support “bottom up” ideas to improve the community. These have ranged from social events such as an annual soapbox derby, an every second Sunday of the month brunch, and movies in the park, to physical upgrades, such as park improvements or a Historic Macon Façade Loan Program. College Hill Alliance, which has held 40 events with some 16,000 participants and over 1,000 volunteers, serves as a catalyst for new efforts like these that are shaped and sustained by residents, local businesses and non-profits. In addition, the Macon Money social media game built around a new currency for local residents, also supported by the Knight Foundation, successfully facilitated connections among residents and local businesses.

Decatur, Georgia

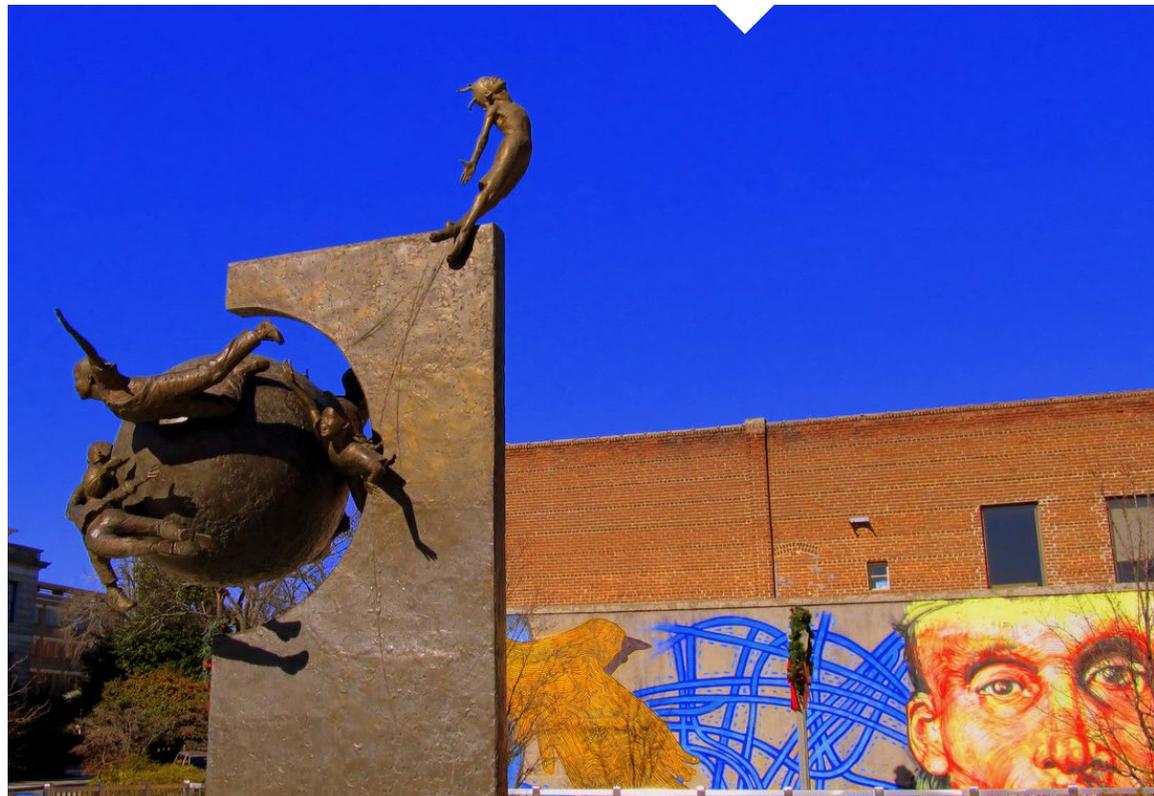
A decade-long effort to engage residents in strategic planning

Decatur established a community engagement infrastructure through a 2000 strategic planning process that laid the foundation for recent outreach activities around a new 2010 strategic plan. Each department’s budget is tied to the strategic plan, and a dedicated and interactive website was established for the planning process. Many information channels have been established for and by the residents of the city to engage in the strategic planning process. At least 70 people volunteered to facilitate community meetings. There is also an active citizens’ blog and newsletter.

Outreach efforts were designed to get information to all populations in the city. The technology channels included online forums, a website, and social media. A task force representing community leaders and business leaders provided outreach and feedback. A survey to youth yielded several dozen students for deliberative discussions. Seniors were invited to morning and weekend meetings. Residents received information in the public housing project, in bars, coffee shops, and store fronts. In March 2011, Decatur’s

Decatur: Downtown.

Photo credit: flickr.com/beachkat1



City Commission unanimously adopted the 2010 Strategic Plan, capping a year-long community discussion that engaged a record 1,500 residents.

San Jose

Leading through neighborhood-based initiatives

As in many communities, San Jose has had a wide variety of civic initiatives, mostly disconnected from one another. There have been two efforts based on neighborhood geography: the Strong Neighborhoods initiative, a 19-neighborhood initiative that has often been cited as a strong example of city-led democratic governance, and Somos Mayfair, a community based non-profit located in one of the most transitional neighborhoods in the region. From the beginning, much of the Strong Neighborhoods initiative's identity and purpose was tied to an \$80 million redevelopment fund; when the money ran out and the state legislature dissolved the Redevelopment Authority, the initiative was unable to survive. Some of the contacts and activity are being maintained by the city manager's office, but with reduced staffing. Somos Mayfair is expanding and taking on a new leadership training role for other neighborhoods.

Meanwhile, there have been a number of online engagement initiatives, including: NeighborGoods, a platform designed to build local networking and sharing opportunities online that receives support from local libraries; NeighborWebSJ, a website designed to connect neighborhoods to City Hall and to each other; and a new social media effort emerging out of People Acting in Community Together, which up until recently has been





a more traditional community organizing effort affiliated with PICO, a national network of faith-based community organizations. While this picture represents an interesting mix of initiatives, the work seems disjointed and one wonders whether a more comprehensive, cross-sector planning effort might help more of these civic innovators succeed.

Akron: Mayor Don Plusquellic in planning meeting

Akron

Revitalizing schools and neighborhoods

The Knight Foundations is funding several initiatives that show promise toward building community relations and individual leadership capacities in Akron, building on efforts to revitalize schools and neighborhoods. In 2003, Akron citizens approved a 0.25 percent income tax increase to partially fund remodeling or rebuilding efforts at all Akron Public Schools. The schools are designed to serve as vibrant Community Learning Centers that provide in-school, after-school and summer programs for students, while also providing adult education, workforce development and community activities for Akron residents. In addition, the Akron Neighborhood Trust has begun a program in one of the Community Learning Center clusters, Buchtel, to identify a vision for the neighborhood.

The response to a call for volunteers to lead community engagement dialogues resulted in nearly 40 people being trained as facilitators, which included representatives from the mayor's and the city council's offices. Community meetings have been conducted in several learning centers and attendance ranges from 30 to 60 residents per meeting. Coordinators report that this level of participation is due in large part to the fact that transportation, childcare and meals are provided for the sessions. Neighborhood issues identified so far include public safety, job readiness, and service delivery from local

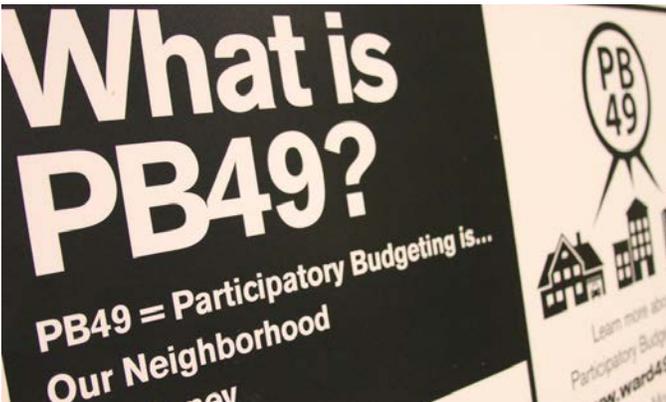
government and literacy programs. An evaluator/coordinator has been hired to develop infrastructure plans and governing practices for the Learning Centers to ensure the continuation of community engagement activities.

Detroit

Fostering innovation through social entrepreneurship

Spurred by the efforts of private social entrepreneurs and foundations (including, notably, the Knight Foundation), Detroit is experiencing a growth of innovative initiatives to build citizen networks, spread knowledge, and revitalize the community's vibrancy. Notable efforts include the micro-lending Kiva Cities initiative that empowers Detroiters to champion and lend to small businesses in the community, the social network-driven Black Male Engagement effort that highlights black men and boys leading others to community service and the Detroit Urban Innovation Exchange that links locals with business minded "do-ers."

The bright spots in Detroit have almost exclusively been spurred by private and philanthropic efforts, with limited to no assistance from city government. Although there is an ongoing sense that everyone is trying contribute to the revitalization of the community, the city is lacking a coordinating entity that approaches engagement systematically, with respect to all citizens in the community.



OUR FOUR CASE STUDIES

Detroit, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Austin

The four cities selected for our in-depth case studies were selected with an emphasis on variation in experiences across the criteria outlined in the previous chapter. Specifically, we examined:

- The mix of tools used in community engagement
- The breadth of individuals and organizations engaged
- The types of successes and outcomes
- The extent to which the models used are replicable and sustainable

In addition, we chose two Knight communities (Detroit and Philadelphia) and two non-Knight communities (Austin and Chicago) to ensure that our analysis of bright spots has application beyond those efforts supported and seeded by the foundation. A brief summary of each case study is provided below, with longer summaries presented in the pages that follow.

From top left:

Detroit: Detroit Soup, photo credit: flickr.com/Collaborative Cities

Philadelphia: photo credit: Technically Philly

Chicago: Participatory Budgeting meeting, photo credit: flickr.com/GroundworkCDS

Chicago: Participatory Budgeting meeting, photo credit: flickr.com/GroundworkCDS

Austin: Imagine Austin release party, photo credit: flickr.com/austintexasgov

Detroit

The community engagement bright spots in Detroit comprise a loosely connected set of high-energy efforts to transform the narrative and reality of Detroit as a depressed and declining community. Across the city, and particularly in the urban core, civic entrepreneurs are leading efforts to redefine experiences for past and future Detroiters—house by house, store by store, neighborhood by neighborhood. The energy in these efforts is described as new, kinetic, raw and at times, unsophisticated and somewhat naive about the scale of the challenges facing Detroit. But, as Rishi Jaitly, the Knight Foundation’s lead in Detroit noted, “The energy here is real, and should not be discounted.”

Bright spots in Detroit include efforts to seed and fund, through crowd-sourced or traditional micro-finance mechanisms, community development initiatives, entrepreneurs and small business development. Bright spots also include individual- and neighborhood-level efforts to develop community engagement organized around Detroit’s future or around social and community-building activities such as a local soccer league.

Challenges in Detroit center around establishing more stable connections between efforts, replicating the successes, initiating partnerships with public institutions, addressing issues of race and difference, and engaging harder-to-reach communities—challenges that all have to do with scale and how to sustain the micro-level energy that characterizes current efforts.

Philadelphia

Compelling initiatives have emerged in Philadelphia out of the city’s entrepreneurial technology community. Partnerships among the private sector, public sector, foundations and universities are in pursuit of a better Philadelphia through open data and technology. This movement is manifest in the city’s open data initiative, drawing the energy of efforts emerging in other sectors, including the city’s co-working spaces, venture funds, local foundations, emerging technology press and universities.

In contrast to Detroit, local government has become an active participant and collaborator, serving as a convener of key stakeholders, providing access to data systems, and using the mayoral bully pulpit to bring attention and lend credibility to the initiatives. Philadelphia has moved to institutionalize this strategy through the mayor’s executive order on open data and the appointment of Mark Headd, formerly of Code for America, as the city’s first Chief Data Officer.

Challenges remain in ensuring the efforts’ long-term success, expanding access for harder-to-reach communities, and connecting technology solutions to fundamental challenges facing the community.

Chicago

Since 2010, Alderman Joe Moore in Chicago's 49th Ward has sustained and expanded a participatory budgeting strategy that engages residents in deciding how to prioritize and spend \$1.3 million in local infrastructure funds. The participatory budgeting process is conducted primarily through a range of community meetings—educational meetings in each of the Ward's eight geographic sections, followed by the formation of committees to work on specific topic areas such as parks, arts and streets. Those groups met and deliberated for six months. Ward-wide assemblies are held where each committee presents their proposal ideas, receives feedback and selects a final list of projects to be placed on a ballot. The election is held each April, with the projects that receive the most votes going forward until the money is exhausted. The process, which is currently in its fourth year, has engaged a much broader and more diverse community in governing.

As a result of the work in the 49th Ward, five to six additional Chicago wards used a participatory budgeting strategy in 2012. This is one major challenge and opportunity for engagement advocates in Chicago; another is improving participatory budgeting by adding online elements that will further inform and enrich the process, and better connect it with other neighborhood issues and priorities.

Austin

In 2009, the City of Austin embarked on an effort to create a new comprehensive plan to guide the city's next 30 years of growth, spending and conservation of resources. Austin's planning effort was designed and driven by a community engagement process that employed a diverse set of in-person and online tools and strategies. First, the city worked with citizens to develop a community engagement plan that would reflect and represent the diversity of values and perspectives in the city. The city then implemented the community engagement plan, involving a three-year, multi-phase process that engaged more than 25,000 residents in the development of the final comprehensive plan for Austin's future, *Imagine Austin*, that was adopted in June 2012.

Austin now faces the challenge of how to move from a temporary, large-scale planning process to a more sustainable system of engagement.

“To understand what is happening in Detroit, you have to get comfortable with innovation at the micro-, micro- level...It’s gritty and it’s happening almost in spite of institutions in every sector that are broken or ineffective at fostering change.”

— Dan Gilmartin, Michigan Municipal League

INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS INTERVIEWED IN DETROIT

- Mikel Elcessor, WDET Detroit
- Dan Gilmartin, Michigan Municipal League
- Nick Gorga, Hatch Detroit
- Wendy Jackson, Kresge Foundation
- Rishi Jaitly, Knight Foundation (Detroit)
- Sean Mann, Detroit City Futbol League (also now with the Michigan Municipal League)
- Dan Pitera, Detroit Works Project
- Delphia Simmons, Kiva Detroit
- Chris Uhl, Skillman Foundation

DETROIT

The wild, wired west of community engagement

When you talk to civic entrepreneurs in Detroit, you hear a common refrain: This city is like the Wild West, you can do anything here! Nick Gorga of Hatch Detroit explains it in economic terms, claiming that the “barriers to entry are very low” for people who want to try something new and interesting. And if you succeed, you will be noticed—“just opening a sandwich shop in downtown Detroit will get you on the evening news.”

Part of this Wild West feeling comes from the physical surroundings. Even though Detroit is an older Rust Belt city, the wide avenues in the downtown and the new wide-open spaces in neighborhoods, which have emerged in part through demolition of blighted housing, make it seem emptier than is actually the case. In fact, Detroit has greater population density than Denver or Phoenix. Still, some people mention the coyotes that have moved into neighborhoods near downtown. And Delphia Simmons of Kiva Detroit complains about the pheasants that now occupy the vacant lot next to her house and wake her up early in the morning with their calls.

The support of several foundations, including the Knight Foundation, combined with the wide-open environment for civic entrepreneurs, has fostered a number of bright spots in Detroit’s engagement scene.

Most of these bright spots, particularly those supported by Knight, rely on the same successful principles. All of them are intentional about building supportive networks of people, and use social media in concert with face-to-face meetings to make and sustain those connections. They are all information- and idea-rich, allowing innovation to spread rapidly and gather support through the network. And they all seem to incentivize experimentation and entrepreneurship by adding a ‘cool factor’ so that there is a psychological reward for people in these networks when they do things that seem innovative and civic-minded.

This network-building is in the service of tangible goals. Kiva Detroit, for example, is focused on economic development in low-income neighborhoods. Hatch Detroit aims at downtown retail development, partly to attract new residents. The local Code for America fellows work to expand access to government data. These individual networks seem at least somewhat connected to one another, both through social media and via regular face-to-face gatherings like Detroit Soup.

The public institutions of Detroit do not seem to have much of a presence in these networks. Nick Gorga reported that though he and his Hatch Detroit partners had spoken with hundreds of people as they set up their organization, they hadn’t talked with

a single person in local government. Sean Mann noted that most of the successes he and his collaborators have experienced have come in spite of, rather than with the support of government institutions. The Detroit Public Schools were also treated as a completely separate institution. Universities such as Wayne State were mentioned more often, but seemed like more peripheral players in Detroit's engagement scene – important to particular neighborhoods, like Midtown, but otherwise less engaged.

Lessons and observations

One result of this division between civic entrepreneurs and civic institutions is a lack of coordination among people working to solve public problems. The new civic networks represent a great deal of work to tap assets outside government and other institutions; the absence of a connection with those public institutions, however, means that the vast majority of the money and manpower available for public problem-solving (the traditional public assets, which in dollar figures or man-hours still dwarf the extra-institutional actors) is being directed in ways that don't necessarily reflect or connect with what Detroiters want.

There is a largely unspoken racial dimension of this division. The civic entrepreneurs working in Detroit seemed to be disproportionately white, well-educated, and middle- to upper-income, whereas the workforce in City Hall and the Detroit Public Schools is dominated by the African-America middle class. Despite this demographic disparity, the issue of race and difference did not emerge in interviews unless the interviewers brought it up, and there was some resistance to the notion that it was something worth talking about. Similarly, the regional nature of the challenges facing Detroit was not a common topic in the interviews.

Like the Knight Foundation, the Kresge and Skillman Foundations are also supporting engagement efforts in a variety of ways, focusing on engagement as the key ingredient to catalyze

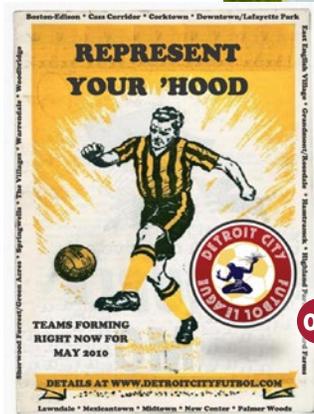
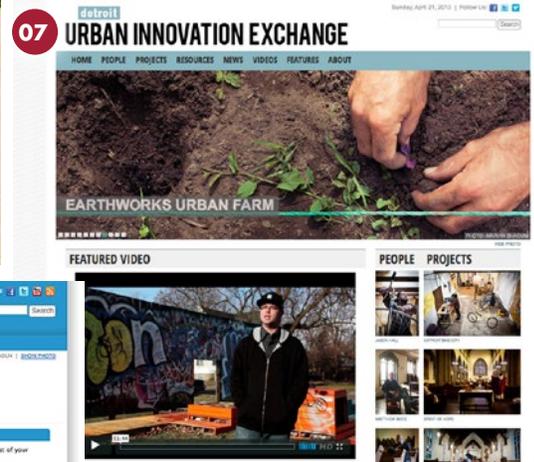
other work. Case in point: the Detroit Works project, which has received support from the foundations, is an explicitly cross-sector effort that involves civic entrepreneurs and public institutions. Detroit Works seems to have recovered from a rocky start, and has engaged thousands of Detroiters using various techniques. It isn't clear, however, who exactly will be called upon to implement the plan for Detroit that emerges from the process—and this question is complicated by the fact that the state government now has a legal role in local governance as a result of recent scandals and ongoing financial strains.

And while Detroit Works has built a city-wide network of stakeholders as well as networks within three targeted neighborhoods, there doesn't seem to be a plan for sustaining those connections in the way that the other civic groupings have been sustained. Though it has enjoyed great promise, Detroit Works needs additional energy, investment, and institutional commitment to succeed.

While the Wild West is in some ways an appealing analogy for civic entrepreneurship in Detroit in the context of open space and available opportunities, there are more foreboding sides to the story that may also be relevant. The real Wild West was dominated by violent struggles between newcomers and natives, between farmers and cattlemen, and between the forces of law and order and outsiders. There may be ways that technology-assisted, socially savvy network-building can help to bridge similar types of divisions in Detroit, making it a city that is more innovative, equitable, and engaged.

BRIGHT SPOTS IN DETROIT

Bottom up civic engagement groups in the city



01 Kiva Detroit: a program where community organizations provide microloans to local small businesses.

02 Hatch Detroit: an effort to develop and support independent retail businesses by providing funding, business services and community exposure.

03 Code for America: Detroit is one of the cities involved in this national initiative to connect

technology experts with public service through a system of embedded fellowships.

04 Detroit Works: a community engagement process to create a shared, achievable vision for Detroit's future that serves as a guide to improving the physical, social and economic landscape of the city.

05 Detroit Soup: a monthly dinner at which participants raise money and select creative projects to receive microfinancing.

06 Model D: Detroit's online magazine, which highlights the successes of engagement efforts like the ones listed here.

07 Urban Innovation Exchange: an initiative to showcase and advance Detroit's growing civic and social innovation movement.

08 Data Driven Detroit: an initiative providing high quality information and analysis to drive engagement and informed decision-making among individuals and institutions.

09 The Detroit City Futbol League/Club: an 800-person, 28-neighborhood league that goes beyond soccer to bring together neighbors and highlight Detroit's unique and historic communities.

“My belief is that if we keep helping these good guys [in City Hall] do good work, their colleagues will need to learn the value of partnering with engaged citizens.”

— Alex Hillman, Indy Hall

INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS INTERVIEWED IN PHILADELPHIA

- Andrew Buss, Director of Public Programs, Division of Technology, City of Philadelphia
- Robert Cheetham, Proprietor, Azavea
- Jeff Friedman, Director of Civic Innovation & Participation, Office of the Mayor, City of Philadelphia
- Mark Headd, Government Relations, Code for America
- Alex Hillman, Co-Founder, Indy Hall
- Brian James Kirk, Sean Blanda, and Christopher Wink, Co-Founders, Technical Philly
- Arun Prabhakaran, Director, Govt. & and Strategic Partnerships, Urban Affairs Coalition
- Claire Robertson-Kraft, Chair, Young Involved Philadelphia
- Patrick Sherlock, Program Associate, Environment and Communities, William Penn Foundation
- Paul E. Wright, Local Media Development, Comcast

PHILADELPHIA

High-tech “civic fusion” at work

Alex Hillman, one of two founders of Philadelphia’s internationally regarded co-working space, Indy Hall, explains civic fusion this way:

Imagine a long room with doors on either end. Next to each door is a coat rack. Through one door walk citizens of the city. They hang up their coats, take off their hats. At the other end of the room walk in the City people. They walk in and do the same. In the middle of the room is a table, and the table is a problem. Everyone mixes and mingles around the table. Nobody knows, exactly, where anyone else is from. But everybody is in the room for one reason: to solve that problem today. Everyone brings their perspective to the table, public or private. That table is civic fusion.

The term civic fusion, widely used within Philadelphia’s government and entrepreneurial technology sectors, was coined by Jeff Friedman, co-director of Philadelphia’s Office of New Urban Mechanics, to describe the public-private efforts in Philadelphia to address pressing civic needs.

Philadelphia was host to a number of civic efforts in the late 2000s, from the nascent networking group Philly Startup Leaders, to the “unconference” BarCampPhilly, to the independent online press developing around this new community of entrepreneurs, hackers, do-it-yourself “makers” and activists. These efforts existed mostly outside the knowledge or interest of City Hall. Indeed, many were only loosely networked with one another.

The story of the fusion with public efforts over the past several years is not that city government was able to organize a civic infrastructure or manifest a set of tools that did not exist—that energy was largely already in place in other parts of the community. The key to understanding Philadelphia’s developing civic fusion is that the city government participated within that community to learn from and partner with it. It all started in late 2009, when Philadelphia was preparing an application to Google to be a recipient of its experimental fiber optic broadband investment, Indy Hall invited Allen Frank, the City’s Chief Information Officer, as well as Jeff Friedman and several hackers and community activists to assemble a “Gigabit Philly” website. As Alex Hillman related:

We spent an entire day developing that website and at the end of that day Jeff Friedman turned to me and said ‘I didn’t even know work could get done this way.’ And I think that moment was a turning point for me in realizing that we could impact how they get things done. And so since that day I’ve paid very close attention

to applying the kinds of model in government that we've seen be successful in the community. My belief is that if we keep helping these good guys do good work, their colleagues will need to learn the value of partnering with engaged citizens.

In July of 2009, Friedman began to invite members of the civic community to be a part of a group that dubbed itself “Open Access Philadelphia.” Every week, this group convened around a conference table – both the literal and figurative table in Hillman’s metaphor, with a cast of characters that changed and evolved month-to-month.

A set of loosely connected successes soon followed. In 2010, the city was awarded federal broadband money for three years of work on digital inclusion now under the heading of “Keypoints Philadelphia.” That same year, the city’s application to Google was successful and Philadelphia became one of several cities to host the first cohort of Code for America fellows. Outside of government, Technically Philly had expanded through a combination of foundation and corporate support, and the co-working community originally centered around Indy Hall began to expand and spin off new communities of hackers, gamers, and others.

But the work of Open Access Philadelphia remained relatively stalled. Its members had decided that a portal to collect and publish public data for application development should be their first project, yet without a budget or any formal authority they could not move forward. Robert Cheetham, proprietor of the Philadelphia-based software firm Azavea remembers that several members, frustrated with the slow pace of progress, approached him with a request: “I’m pretty sure what they want to do isn’t that hard,” he remembers them saying, “and they need someone to tell them that.” Cheetham advised them to “begin by celebrating what you already have.”

Soon, members of Open Access Philadelphia became aware of the large trove of geospatial information already published by Philadelphia’s very forward-thinking municipal GIS community. In addition, the Police Department had recently begun publishing its Part 1 crimes online, and the city’s 311 system was nearly ready to release summary call information. These three data sets began the core of the first “Open Data Philly” release. Cheetham devoted Azavea’s considerable expertise and some of his staff resources to developing the initial site pro bono, estimating it at “one or two week’s work.” The group set their target for the site’s launch for April 2011, to announce it at Philly Tech Week. The city’s first major celebration of its InfoTech community would therefore see the first product of this new public-private partnership around data transparency.

In a virtual round robin, partners in the open access initiative took the opportunity to kick in some of their own time and financial support. The William Penn Foundation contributed \$30,000 to encourage Cheetham to develop an additional set of social functionality around the open data platform. The Code for America fellows, who visited

PHILADELPHIA'S CIVIC FUSION

Participating organizations in the city's online community engagement efforts



04



01



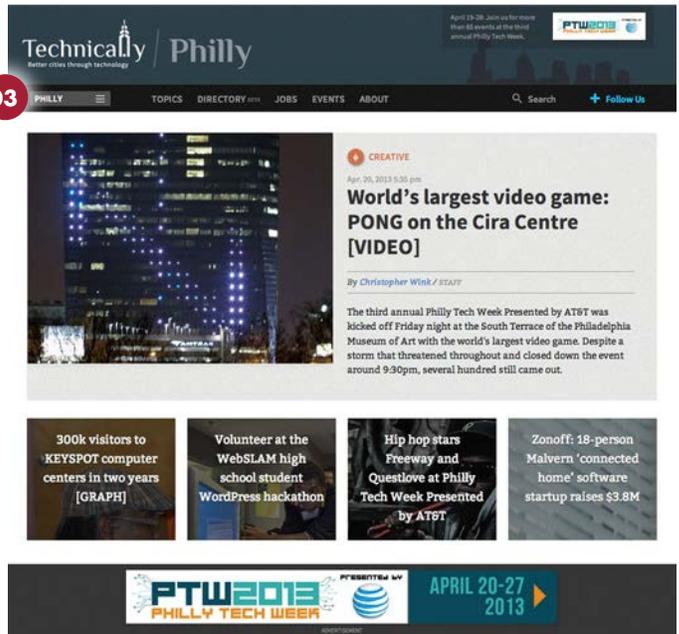
05



02



03



01 Members of the "InfoTech" industry, including Paul Wright, former vice president of an online startup and now head of local media development for Comcast, who chaired **Open Access Philadelphia** for several years. Later, the participation of Robert Cheetham, founder and president of the software development firm **Azavea**, was crucial to the success of this work.

02 Foundation staff, including Patrick Sherlock, a program associate at the **William Penn Foundation** who played an important role in several of the later open data initiatives.

03 Members of the developing technology press, including the co-founders of **Technically Philly**, who attended meetings "off the record" but used the discussions

to track the city's agenda and coordinate work on events such as Philly Tech Week.

04 City employees, especially Andrew Buss from the **Office of Innovation & Technology**, who, with the support of the Knight Foundation, coordinated the city's successful application for nearly \$20 million in broadband stimulus funds.

05 Representatives from area universities, including the **University of Pennsylvania**, **Temple University**, and the **Science Center**, a biotechnology incubator.

Philadelphia for the first time in February 2011, two months before Philly Tech Week, created several small applications, built on top of the open data access application interface, as a kind of proof of concept. These applications were catalogued alongside the data and launched together two months later.

The launch of Open Data Philly was important in several senses. It validated the public-private partnership behind Open Access Philadelphia as having the capacity to launch useful products, and provided a focus for their energy and resources. It contributed to a “signaling effect,” along with the mayor’s participation in civic hacking events and sponsorship of the community’s first signature event, Tech Week. It also created pressure for the further release of information to the public and to application developers.

In particular, Open Data Philly users quickly requested data from the Southeast Pennsylvania Transit Authority, or SEPTA. Activists within SEPTA used this as leverage to push for the public release of an open data access application interface that the transit authority had been developing for nearly a decade, and used internally. Yet the creation of this portal and release of several data sets were not, by themselves, enough—only several hundred participants had been attracted to Open Data Philly by mid-year.

The next advance came through the Open Data Race, conducted from August to October 2011. The premise was a contest that would award a nominal (\$2,000) amount of money to the best idea for an app using public data, along with a promise to work with the city to make that dataset available and with the development community to build it. Nearly 30 submissions were received. Non-profits used their networks to encourage people to register with Open Data Philly and vote for their favorite submissions. Several thousand people did register and vote.

The winners were announced in October at a public symposium and are described at: <http://opendataphilly.org/contest/>. This created a constituency for Open Data Philly, built brand awareness among people outside of the information technology sector, and created an ordered list of approximately 20 of the most demanded public data sets for Open Access Philly to push.

Shortly after the conclusion of the Open Data Race, Cheetham and several Open Access Philadelphia colleagues asked the city’s Chief Innovation Officer, Adel W. Ebeid, about releasing some of the data sets identified by the Open Data Race as a priority for the community. Ebeid agreed to this in principle and, by January, had formally committed to preparing an executive order for the mayor, affirming that the city would make a practice of releasing public data through a city-run portal. Members of Open Access Philadelphia drafted language and in April 2012, at the second Philly Tech Week, the mayor signed the executive order, which created the position of Chief Data Officer (Mark Headd, formerly of Code for America, was then hired to fill this position) and established a Data Governance Advisory Board.

More recently, hosting for the Open Data Philly portal has been taken over by the Philadelphia Public Interest Information Network, or PPIIN, a \$2.4 million creation of the William Penn Foundation housed at Temple University. A major decision now looms: when city government creates its open data portal, as the executive order requires, it is unclear if they will adopt the PPIIN-hosted Open Data Philly infrastructure as their platform or try and create their own, situated firmly within municipal government. Open Access Philly, led by Paul Wright, sent the Nutter administration a letter asking it to commit to building on what exists rather than “building a new portal from scratch.”

Lessons and observations

Open Access Philadelphia’s entrepreneurial orientation and unusual role, with members both inside and outside of government, facilitated action in city hall to release data. Participants in this community engagement effort contributed different types of assistance—pro bono development, foundation funding, public resources—and generated cross-sector patience, trust and respect. This civic partnership has been as much about government adopting the ethic of the InfoTech community as the government finding productive ways to harness the energy in the civic sector.

These initiatives would not be successful without civic fusion. There is an ongoing question about the future location of the open data portal, for example. While the mayor’s executive order commits the city to supporting a city-run open data warehouse, there is unanimous agreement among both government and private Open Access Philadelphia members that Open Data Philly is stronger outside of government: it hosts many private datasets that for legal and logistical reasons the government would not, and it remains “community-owned.”

One element of that fusion is a remarkable unwillingness of any of the major actors to take credit for the development of Open Access Philadelphia or any of its products, including Open Data Philly. There is a clear respect for each other’s roles and perhaps a concern for undermining that spirit of collaboration by getting out in front.

This civic fusion was sustained by a variety of institutions and strategies, including foundation funding. The Knight Foundation

supported broadband applications. Several other foundations initially supported Technically Philly, a dedicated press described by Alex Hillman as “our Rolling Stone”. A broad community of civic and commercial entities hosted signature events also hosted signature events such as Ignite Philly and Philly Tech Week, and eventually helped attract public sponsorship of Open Access Philadelphia alongside the endorsement of the mayor.

So far, this Philadelphia story has been a success in terms of expanding access to public data. It has not, however, been connected with broader efforts to engage people in public decision-making and problem-solving. Most of the people interviewed were especially conscious of the need to reach out to underserved communities, and two pilots are underway:

- Digital On Ramps, led by Lisa Nutter and the Urban Affairs Coalition, is leveraging broadband investments and mobile technology to create a platform for education and digital literacy.
- Freedom Rings/Keypots, the \$20 million federal investment in broadband access, has developed a strong network of non-profits to expand Internet access and digital literacy in underserved communities.

But these efforts, if successful, may simply expand access while failing to connect people with meaningful opportunities for engagement. Philadelphia is home to many other kinds of engagement efforts, from neighborhood-level organizing to the mayor’s high-profile effort to involve residents in priority-setting for the city budget. Perhaps the greatest challenge (and opportunity) in Philadelphia is to connect the dots between its open data successes and other aspects of the broader civic picture.



“...the people that are really involved and engaged in the leadership process and community groups are not the usual suspects. Overwhelmingly, the people involved in this process are new people.”

— Joe Moore, Alderman, City of Chicago

INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS INTERVIEWED IN CHICAGO

- Joe Hoereth, Institute for Policy and Civic Engagement, Univ. of Illinois-Chicago
- Nora Ramos, Institute for Policy and Civic Engagement, Univ. of Illinois-Chicago
- Josh Lerner, Executive Director, Participatory Budgeting Project
- Joe Moore, Alderman, 49th Ward, Chicago
- Janice Thomson, local participation practitioner

CHICAGO

The elected official as an engagement leader

The story of Chicago's 49th Ward provides an opportunity to understand the motivations of public officials in community engagement. Alderman Joe Moore brought the concept of participatory budgeting to his ward, and has continued to be its most active proponent. He embraced this bottom up budgeting process because he thought it would address a major threat to his career; in turn, the process seems to have transformed Moore's own perception of his role as an elected official.

After serving for 16 years as a Chicago alderman, Moore was narrowly re-elected in the 2007 election. This experience was something of a wake-up call for Moore, who felt he needed to reconnect with many of his constituents. The 49th Ward, which encompasses the neighborhood of Rogers Park, has roughly 60,000 residents living in an area of two square miles. It is extremely diverse, with over 80 languages spoken. It is about 30 percent Latino, 30 percent African American, 30 percent white, and 10 percent Asian American.

Moore had been exposed to a number of public engagement principles and practices as a member of the Democratic Governance Panel of the National League of Cities. He attended a workshop on participatory budgeting in 2007, and decided it might be a productive way to reconnect with his ward.

In many cities, participatory approaches to budgeting are being adopted by mayors and city councilmembers because they are facing increasingly difficult budget shortages and feel that engaging citizens is a way to either make budget cuts with less controversy or show residents that raising revenue is necessary. In both scenarios, it is the increasingly problematic state of public finance that is driving the prospects for public engagement.

In Chicago, each alderman is allotted a line item (referred to as "menu money") amounting to approximately \$1 million annually, to spend on capital improvements and initiatives within the ward. The menu money practice has occasionally come under fire in recent few years for being an inefficient allocation of capital resources. Moore felt that using participatory budgeting to allocate earmarked funds to his ward might help demonstrate the value of the program.

In 2009, Moore brought together leaders from 40 to 50 civic, religious and community organizations, and asked each of them to appoint one or two representatives from their organization to serve on a steering committee to

Chicago: Alderman Joe Moore
at planning meeting
Photo credit: flickr.com/
GroundworkCDS



PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING IN THE 49TH WARD

A timeline of bottom up decision-making in the community

01

Phase One: engage in community outreach in eight sections of the ward to explain how participatory budgeting works

02

Phase Two: organize committees of citizens to suggest budgeting options for key community concerns

03

Phase Three: presentations by these citizens committees of their detailed budget plans to two neighborhood assemblies, receive feedback, and place the final proposals on the ballot

04

Phase Four: voters in the ward select their top eight projects for funding, in order of priority

design the process and timetable for allocating the 49th Ward menu money. The process occurred in several phases. (see timeline above)

In the first phase, the ward was divided into eight geographic regions where meetings were held to describe participatory budgeting as a tool and outline how residents could engage in the process. Participants were then organized into committees of citizens that would come up with options for spending and projects such as parks, arts and streets/transportation. The committees deliberated for six months, brainstorming and reviewing project ideas, conducting research, obtaining cost estimates and ultimately selecting their candidate projects for inclusion on a ward-wide ballot. Early in 2010, during two neighborhood assemblies, the committees presented their project proposals, received feedback, and put together final project lists across the six project areas that appeared on the ballot.

Ward voters selected their top eight projects in April 2010, with the highest vote-getters, in rank order, receiving the menu money until it was exhausted. Moore's promise to the voters was that he would implement the results of the vote. Shortly thereafter, Moore and his team evaluated the success of the participatory budgeting effort and deemed it so successful that they used the same process, with some revisions and improvements, in 2011 and again in 2012. Now heading into its fourth year, the participatory budgeting process in the 49th Ward continues to consist of a series of neighborhood assemblies, work by committees to develop project proposals, and a ward-wide election to determine which proposals should receive funding.

In 2010, 36 individual proposals appeared on the ballot, and more than 1,600 residents voted in the election. The number of voters dipped to roughly 1,000 in 2011. Participation on the neighborhood assemblies apparently reached its highest level in the third year of this novel community engagement process, and the number of voters rose again to 1,300 in 2012.

Lessons and observations

Throughout the process, Moore and his allies in the ward have received free assistance from Josh Lerner and his colleagues at the Participatory Budgeting Project, a non-profit based in New York City. Lerner says that in the second year of the process in the 49th Ward, there was a stronger emphasis on reaching underserved populations, partly through a decentralized voting process. He reports that participants in the process became more racially and ethnically diversified, and thus more representative of the ward as a whole, in 2011 and again in 2012.

The experience of participatory budgeting in other cities (mainly in other countries) is that engagement grows and deepens over time. In some Latin American cities, tens of thousands of people take part in the process annually. Moore asserts that the process in his ward has significantly increased the number and diversity of people engaged in the public life of the ward. "The people that are really involved in the leadership process and community groups are not the usual suspects, these are new people, not the meeting junkies," says Moore. "The Ward has 58,000 people, but the meeting junkies are the same 200. Overwhelmingly, the people involved in this process are new people and that has just been terrific to see."

In addition to increasing involvement in decision-making, participatory budgeting in the 49th Ward seems to have spurred citizens to be more active problem-solvers. Today, for example, a dog park and a community garden, two projects that were initiated and approved through the process, are now operated by teams of neighborhood volunteers.

One way in which the process might improve is by taking advantage of online tools. So far, they have been used only minimally. Some of the recruitment is done via email, and there is a website and blog for the process that explains participatory budgeting. The blog includes a video component, and lists the projects that have been proposed for the voting. There are a number of possibilities for using online tools to strengthen the process, among them:

- Allowing people to vote for the projects online, and offer comments on how to improve them, either as a preliminary to the final vote or alongside it.
- Using GIS mapping tools to allow residents to identify potential projects, and/or visualize how they would affect the ward.

- Using budget simulators to help people allocate dollars among their favorite projects.
- Supporting people to implement ideas by offering online team management tools.
- Creating a stronger ongoing network of participants through a ward or neighborhood-based online forum like the ones supported by www.e-democracy.org.
- Creating a portal that will allow participants to gather and analyze data on the process.

It is possible that continuing the process, and potentially adding new online elements, could expand the impact in the 49th Ward. But Lerner cautioned that the online elements work best, "where people are more wired. It can work anywhere, but it takes more support and assistance to be effective in reaching larger numbers of people, particularly in harder-to-reach communities. It's often funding-dependent, so it's a choice about where you put your resources."

One measure of the success of participatory budgeting in the 49th Ward is that it is now in its fourth year. Another measure of its success is that the use of the budgeting process is spreading. Working with the Chicago Community Trust and the University of Illinois at Chicago, Moore and Lerner are expanding the implementation of participatory budgeting in the city to five or six additional wards. Building on the success of the process in the 49th Ward, Lerner has also launched similar work in eight districts in New York City for 2013. As Lerner suggests:

I think that success means that the work we started needs to be sustainable and growing, either by engaging more people in Ward 49, or spreading to more wards, or spreading to other cities. Taking on larger budget issues or using participatory budgeting to deal with budget cuts would also be an advancement. But, ultimately, as with our work in Ward 49, the key to success is that the decisions that have been made by the public need to be implemented.

It is clear already that the process has had an effect on how Alderman Moore views his role in the community. In 2011, he was re-elected with 72 percent of the vote. "I take the result of the last election as a sign of popular support for participatory budgeting and any similar initiatives that nurture citizen engagement and promote participatory governance," Moore says. "I take it as a sign that people in the 49th ward want to be active participants in governing rather than being passive observers of government."



“This is a city that prides itself on, and has a long history of, successful community engagement. There is an underlying culture of engagement that is a part of how the city is governed. What we designed was not your father’s comprehensive planning process.”

— Larry Schooler, Community Engagement Consultant, City of Austin

INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS INTERVIEWED IN AUSTIN

- Larry Schooler, Austin Community Engagement Consultant
- Garner Stoll, Assistant Director, Department of Planning and Development Review, City of Austin
- Paul DiGiuseppe, Planner Principal, Department of Planning and Development Review, City of Austin
- Meredith Bossin, Planner, Department of Planning and Development Review, City of Austin
- Jill Goodman, Communications Consultant, Communications & Public Information Office, City of Austin

AUSTIN

Comprehensive planning through community engagement

In 2009, the City of Austin embarked on an effort to create a new comprehensive plan to guide the city's growth, spending and conservation of resources. Austin's planning effort was designed and driven by a community engagement process that employed a diverse set of tools and strategies in an iterative and open process that engaged more than 25,000 residents in the development of the final plan, *Imagine Austin*, which was adopted in June 2012.

The Austin city charter calls for the city to have a comprehensive plan that “shall contain the council's policies for growth, development, and beautification of the land within the corporate limits and the extraterritorial jurisdiction of the city.” In 2009, the city council embarked upon a process for creating a new comprehensive plan. The previous plan was first adopted in 1979 and had been updated in 2008. But the process of updating the old plan exposed the need for a new plan that could better fit the growth projections for Austin, one of the nation's fastest growing cities, over the next three decades.

Comprehensive planning is a common city function, and most cities have planning processes that solicit public input. But Austin chose to use a more aggressive participation strategy, establishing “community engagement” as one of three overarching goals of the process for completing the plan (the other two goals were sustainability and implementation), and allocating a \$1.3 million budget to drive public participation and deliberative processes over a three-year process from 2009-2012. A public participation plan was developed with two principles:

“The plan will reflect the values and aspirations which citizens will be invited to express in a multiple of ways.”

and

“The process will engage members of the public who are not usually involved in city planning and decisions.”

According to Larry Schooler, a community engagement consultant to the city, city leaders wanted to ensure that the comprehensive plan was developed and essentially written by the citizens of Austin. “This is a city that prides itself on, and has a long history of, successful community engagement,” says Schooler. “There is an underlying culture of engagement that is a part of how the city is governed. What we designed was not your father's comprehensive planning process.”

TABLE THREE

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN AUSTIN

Measuring the number of citizens engaged in *Imagine Austin*

In-Person and Surveys	
Participation Workshop	70
Community Forum Series #1	5,892
Community Forum Series #2	4,211
Community Forum Series #3	4,761
Neighborhood meetings	246
Working groups	373
Community Forum Series #4	2,979
Total	18,532
Social media and electronic	
Facebook	2,209
Twitter	1,097
General email list	2,539
YouTube, Flickr, SpeakUp Austin online forum, and www.Imagine Austin net	Exact numbers n/a

The development of the comprehensive plan was guided by a task force of 38 stakeholders from key constituencies and sectors in the city. The community engagement process started with a workshop that was attended by 70 people who helped map out the broader public participation plan. Key components of that plan included four sets of community forums. The first community forum series focused on visioning what Austin would look like in 30 years. The second series then narrowed to options for where and how the city would grow, using 64 different maps of Austin that were developed by the city planning department in response to the values and principles expressed in the first series.

Participants in the second series of community forums were presented with different maps and engaged in weighing tradeoffs and choices in terms of neighborhood growth and land uses. Austin’s planning officials noted that the workshops conducted in this series were often controversial because the choices facing citizens about where to allot the projected population growth challenged people’s notions about their neighborhoods and the city as a whole. But city planner Paul DiGiuseppe noted that the process worked. “It helped attract people to the workshops who aren’t normally active in city government,” he explains. “Despite the difficult tradeoffs, most people liked the exercise and left the workshops energized about Austin’s future.”

The planning department used the priorities identified by citizens across these mapping efforts to narrow the options down to four growth scenarios that reflected different values and preferences of citizens. The four scenarios were deliberated upon in-person by citizens, and supplemented by a survey as part of the third community forum series. Citizen preferences converged around two of the four scenarios, which the planning department used to develop a combined, preferred growth scenario to present to the city council.

Following the development of the preferred growth scenario, working groups were formed and convened around the different building blocks of the plan—economic development, environment, culture, land use, and services, among others. Each working group was comprised of a mix of citizens and experts charged with developing action items for inclusion in a draft comprehensive plan. The draft plan was then completed and deliberated upon in a fourth community forum series.

The city then hosted a release party and asked for online public input using a “Speak Up” process across eight priority areas in the plan. The city received over 1,800 comments in online form, which were compiled and summarized for further deliberation by the task force overseeing the comprehensive plan development process. As DiGiuseppe noted, “We were able to document every comment and every sticky note from the process, resulting in a huge record of public input in the process.” (see Table 3)

The city estimates that over 25,000 citizens took part in the process, through the community forum series, surveys, neighborhood meetings, working groups, social media, and other online communications. The city also developed “meeting-in-a-box” options, both in hard copy and online, for citizens to participate at home, or to host meetings of their own with their individual groups of neighbors, friends and associates. A five-minute overview video and 30-second public service announcement were aired regularly on the city’s public access channel and made available on YouTube, and the city maintained an online presence throughout the process at www.ImagineAustin.net.

The final plan was approved by an overwhelming majority of the task force and adopted by the city council in June 2012.



Lessons and observations

Austin’s community engagement efforts were ultimately successful in generating a new comprehensive plan for the city. Garner Stoll, Assistant Director for Planning, summed up the success of the community engagement process this way:

Looking back at the process, it often felt long and difficult, but in the end we developed a better plan because we were challenged by our citizens. The community engagement effort helped the task force and the city council reach consensus on the final plan because they could be confident that it reflected the values and preferences of the citizens of Austin.

City leaders also offered a number of lessons learned and reflections. Two observations were offered about the city’s efforts at attracting a diverse and representative mix of citizens. First, while diversity was a stated priority of the public participation plan, ensuring that the people involved in the process were representative of the social, economic, ethnic and racial diversity of the Austin population as a whole was a challenge. Stoll noted that “it was an ongoing struggle and we made a lot of course corrections along the way, but it was particularly difficult to penetrate the Hispanic community.”

The city’s efforts included bilingual gatherings and online tools, special events to attract youth and younger families, working

with the school system to conduct outreach efforts and attract participants and hosting meetings and events at other community events such as recreational outings, PTA meetings and churches. City leaders said that the meeting-in-a-box tool was particularly successful with harder-to-reach groups. But, as Jill Goodman in the city's communications office noted, "Most of the efforts we used would succeed at attracting harder-to-reach groups, but percentages-wise, it wouldn't move the needle much because those efforts would also attract traditional audiences as well." And city planner Meredith Bossin reflected that "the length of the process was probably a bit much for people who don't interact with government as regularly, such as youth and the Hispanic community. But, overall, we had better success with the *Imagine Austin* efforts than in the past and learned a lot to help us in the future."

Another measure of diversity, however, is the city's success in engaging parts of the community beyond the typical participants and entrenched interests—a stated goal of the engagement plan. City leaders deemed their efforts to have been successful by this standard, in large part because the community engagement effort was designed to get beyond the usual voices. Stoll noted:

We wanted to gauge a broad base of the community's values and, in the process, hopefully recruit new leaders. This took power away from the usual groups that participate in city government, in some respects, and that was a political challenge, but it also resulted in those groups having to moderate their views as consensus emerged around key aspects of the final plan.

City leaders also reflected on the array of tools used throughout the process, from the in-person meetings to surveys to online and social media efforts. Bossin noted that the key was always finding the "right tools for the particular phases of the process. Each phase had education elements and engagement elements. The online and social media components were particularly useful for standing up the public education components, while the quality of the engagement was usually better in the in-person elements. The online and social media efforts the city used were also very useful at keeping the buzz going and making sure that *Imagine Austin* didn't seem like a dry city process."

While the planning process seems to have been successful, whether it will lead to sustained community engagement is an open question. Participation in public life is certainly much lower now than it was when the face-to-face events and online communications of *Imagine Austin* were going full steam. City staff have complained that the members of the Citizens' Advisory Task Force, who were appointed to help guide future engagement efforts, are mainly concerned with giving input on how local government should implement the plan. The *Imagine Austin* plan is far-reaching, but none of its main planks and none of the specific measures are concerned with long-term civic infrastructure.

CONCLUSION

Bright spots and the bigger picture

All four of the case studies featured in this report should be exciting examples for advocates of engagement. They demonstrate, to varying degrees, the four aspects of successful engagement: the use of new tools and strategies; the ability to reach a broad spectrum of people; notable outcomes; and sustained efforts and structures.

The four case studies and our analysis of the other ten communities examined in this report also reflect the diversity of the leaders in this field. Across the country, community engagement activities have been initiated by all sorts of people, including grassroots organizers, funders, technologists, elected officials, and city staff. With the exception of Philadelphia however, in each of the four case studies one sector of leadership was the animating force behind the engagement work, and was at most only moderately successful in attracting support from other sectors.

Because each sector of engagement leadership brings its own unique incentives and motivations to the work, the way each set of leaders defines engagement is also different. These four case studies and our analysis of 14 cities with promising engagement strategies from which they were drawn highlight the diverse forms of engagement that are gaining traction in communities across the country. These include:

- The use of open data
- Participatory budgeting with public funds
- Community-based funding initiatives
- City-wide visioning and strategic planning
- Civic engagement in growth and redevelopment
- Building community connections
- Equipping residents to participate

We conclude our report with a final review of these diverse forms of community engagement.

The use of open data

Open data offers a new frontier in civic engagement. As the Philadelphia case study demonstrates, open data initiatives equipped the public with previously unavailable data and activated residents to help use that information in new ways. Through hack-a-thons, app development, competitions including Philadelphia's open data race and organizations such as Code for America, which engage technology experts in public service, cities are capitalizing on the energy and creativity of a wide variety of residents to improve the community.

Participatory budgeting with public funds

While Chicago's 49th Ward offers a leading example of participatory budgeting, it is not alone. This budgeting model is spreading within Chicago and in New York City. Other models such as the I Value program in Hampton, and a budget priority setting process in Philadelphia, are similarly designed to engage residents in making tough choices about how to spend limited public resources.

Community-based funding initiatives

While less frequently driven by the public sector, some communities have vibrant pockets of engagement by individuals or civic organizations in community and economic development activities. Detroit is rich in these emerging efforts, with Detroit Soup, Kiva Detroit and Hatch Detroit as prime examples. The Knight Neighborhood Challenge in Macon, which was highlighted in the initial analysis, also has played an important role in stimulating and supporting creative local community and economic development initiatives.

City-wide visioning and strategic planning

Detroit Works, Crossroads Charlotte, and the Decatur 2010 strategic planning process are three examples of a much more widespread practice of engaging large numbers of residents in a city's visioning and strategic planning process. These approaches demonstrate community-based initiatives at their most effective, bringing private citizens actively into city planning processes.

Civic engagement in growth and redevelopment

Successful city leaders recognize that residents often have a high level of concern about growth and redevelopment, and channel this energy into the development of creative solutions. Through an inclusionary process, such as *Imagine Austin*, community members can help the city develop a plan that has a great deal of consensus throughout the community. Similar initiatives can be found in the Delaware River waterfront redevelopment in Philadelphia, St. Paul's Central Corridor Development Strategy, Macon's College Hill Corridor, and San Jose's Strong Neighborhoods initiative.

Building community connections

Other civic engagement bright spots seek to increase engagement by building residents' sense of connectedness to their neighbors and ownership of their community. Some build connections among neighbors through recreation and service, among them the Detroit City Futbol League, Macon Money (and the College Hill Alliance), while others, such as the *Richmond Times-Dispatch's* Public Square or Akron's neighborhood dialogues, focus on community conversations.

Equipping residents to participate

Cities such as San Jose provide neighborhood leadership training while other cities have made great progress in diversifying the mix of residents who are engaged in civic life by actively training and supporting under-represented groups. The Office of New Bostonians supports immigrant integration and engagement. Hampton builds the next generation of leaders by appointing youth to city boards and commissions. And Hartford and other cities in Connecticut sponsor intensive leadership training institutes to help parents become empowered advocates and change agents.

Future community engagement

Across these strategies, technology emerged as a prominent engagement tool, with cities facilitating online discussions, involving residents in developing apps to solve city problems, engaging community members in public meetings through live blogs or providing online platforms to build networking and sharing opportunities. Despite the acknowledged importance of technology however, most strong civic engagement efforts are still rooted in opportunities for in-person gatherings to share ideas, narrow options and come to consensus on a recommended path.

While these may be amplified by technology, few would recommend having technology replace face-to-face interactions entirely. So in this phase of civic evolution, the most catalytic role funders can play may be to help different kinds of engagement leaders understand each other, identify common goals and work together. In some cases, very concrete actions can help network existing bright spots. Co-working spaces can help knit together smaller efforts and create a new energy and momentum, while civic news vehicles such as Model D and the Urban Innovation Exchange in Detroit spread the word about engagement opportunities and celebrate success.

Creating a space for strong public-private partnerships by bringing city leaders together with foundations, technologists, or community organizers can foster mutual learning and a new openness in government. The civic fusion seen in Philadelphia is a clear case in point. However, this kind of long-term planning should also take stock of the history of engagement in that community, and explore in substantive ways how citizens might actually want to be engaged. Because citizens are diverse, and want many different things out of community life, this inquiry is likely to lead people to the belief that all these disparate sectors of engagement leadership are valuable and necessary. In the process, cities may be able to move from isolated engagement bright spots to an even brighter big picture in which citizens enjoy a broad array of meaningful, powerful, enjoyable opportunities to engage in public life.



with support from:



NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES

1301 Pennsylvania Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20004
nlc.org

KNIGHT FOUNDATION

200 South Biscayne Blvd, Suite 3300
Miami, FL 33131
knightfoundation.org



Photo credit: Knight Foundation

