

To: Mayor and City Council, City Manager, City Attorney

From: Robin Beltramini, Councilmember

Subject: Recentering Democracy around Citizens
 Conference at Cantigny Conference Center, Wheaton IL
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I was recently invited to be part of a most unique meeting convened by the Deliberative Democracy Consortium and funded by the McCormick Foundation (hence the Cantigny Center location). The gathering brought together four sets of people:

- Representatives of national associations that represent and convene local leaders (e.g., ICMA, National League of Cities [NLC], League of Women Voters US, National School Public Relations Assn., Americans for Indian Opportunity, National Civic League, American Planning Assn., National Physicians' Alliance, National Coalitions for Dialogue and Deliberation [NCDD], Philanthropy for Civic Engagement, etc.)
- Researchers who study democratic governance and civic experiments (e.g., academics associated with Indiana University, Brandeis University, Gallup Poll, Brookings Institution, The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, etc.)
- Local leaders who have initiated public participation efforts (I was the only elected official participating, but other staff and neighborhood organizers came from Maryland, California, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Washington state, New Mexico, Kansas, Ohio, Toronto, Oregon)
- Practitioners and funders who support these efforts (e.g., McCormick Foundation, Knight Foundation, Kettering Foundation, Grassroots Grantmakers, *AmericaSpeaks*, United Neighborhood Centers of America, E-Democracy.Org, The Whitman Institute, MacNeil/Lehrer Productions, United Way)

The meeting targeted a holistic approach to helping communities establish and sustain healthy democratic arenas for decision-making and problem-solving. Given the disparate interests of the participants, our discussions actually mirrored what would happen in communities that bring a diverse group of people together to work on a single issue, value or challenge.

The goals for the meeting were as follows:

- Understand the new civic challenges and opportunities facing local leaders
- Explore the connections between community engagement and economic vitality
- Articulate a shared vision of how to recenter local democracy around citizens
- Develop an action plan for national associations to work together on issues of local democracy
- Create cross-sector teams in a number of pilot communities and provide them with a range of resources so that they can develop local civic action plans

It was a tall order, but we made progress on all goals, and actually met some of them. I also want to clarify that “local leaders” does not mean political leaders or even government leaders. It means those people within a community who have the power (formal or informal) to influence, convene, guide or direct people within a community. “Community” does not necessarily mean city or town. It often means neighborhood, ethnic group, or some other cohesive group of people.

First, we talked about assumptions and agreed on a few foundational ones. People want a just, equitable and deliberative democracy—no knee jerk actions or solutions, no special interest superseding community interest, a thoughtful transparent process that leads to an understandable decision. Community must be inclusive, intense and interactive—to have healthy engagement all must be welcome, discussion/involvement is not haphazard, all “streets” are two-way.

Potential ingredients for a community with healthy public engagement include:

- Strong tradition of involvement for decision-making and problem-solving
- Legal government structures that give support and legitimacy
- Online community—thriving and geographical
- Social, cultural and political offerings

What is the state of participation today from the perspective of the “involvers”(i.e., leaders)? Challenges? Opportunities? The national associations who convene groups on a regular basis relayed their challenges: diversity of city staff is often lacking, even in highly diverse communities; professionals are fearful of losing control; elected officials fearful of losing respect; the paradigm of formal democracy must shift; training conveners in process of public engagement. Opportunities and successes enumerated were: shared ownership of decisions, therefore supported implementation; help define the answer to “What kind of a community do you want?”; develop safe places for conversation and dialogue; work on environmental issues builds community.

What is the state of participation today from the perspective of the “involved” (i.e., ordinary citizens)? General conclusions were that from *government* the involved expected: respect; honesty and truth; trust; explicit explanation of pay rate and service delivery. The involved expect a slightly different result when talking of *governance*: ability to play a role, have influence and impact; organic opportunities to participate; safe places to discuss and collaborate.

This bifurcated discussion was followed by a no less important one on the various processes used by involvers and needs of the involved. There is a consistent challenge in involving ethnic and racial minorities. This may be because of cultural or historic perspectives brought by foreign-born citizens, or the challenge of adults in single-parent homes finding time for one more set of meetings, or the understanding of why a meeting is important at all, or it could be a lack of communication knowledge—a medium good for one demographic may be useless for another. Ultimately, it is the underlying belief (of this convened group) that all citizens want to build a strong community. The challenge is that such a “barn-raising” requires true citizenship not politics with a capital “P.” Leaders must be willing to set aside personal interest and empower the community to problem-solve together. The Study Circles model or traditional visioning exercises, even some faith-based community protocols provide an open framework for these tasks.

We learned from a presentation given by the primary Gallup researcher on the Soul of the Community data. There is a link between civic attachment and economic opportunity in a community. The multi-year study was conducted in 26 Knight-Ridder communities (Metropolitan Statistical Areas).^{*} By pinpointing what drives residents’ loyalty and passion for where they live

the study helps local leaders make decisions that lead to increased economic vitality. Community Attachment equals a combination of Attitudinal Loyalty and Passion. There are five key Domains (Social Capital, Openness, Emotional Wellness, Civic Involvement & Community Offerings) and seven Sub-Domains (all part of community Offerings—basic services, leadership, education, safety, social offerings, aesthetics & the economy) related to Community Attachment identified in the study.

Generally, Social Offerings (things like common shared experience, entertainment, caring of the community and the “feel” of the community), Openness (welcoming of community) and Aesthetics (beauty, parks, architecture, etc.) are the three most important constructs in Community Attachment. Those communities with a high correlation of Community Attachment metrics tend to have more loyalty and passion which statistically translates to economic success by a measurably higher GDP growth and lower high school dropout rate. People in these communities tend to feel more connected to their communities, carry a more positive and hopeful attitude. Leadership is not seen as a catalyst for either optimism or positive change. Whether or not this is a direct or indirect result of the increasing insertion of Politics into local decision-making is fodder for another study. One of the alarming negative findings was that young talent is one of the least welcomed groups. In Detroit, the good news is that members of that young talent community are some of the most attached members of the Detroit area—going against national norms.

The lessons learned through these data are many. As they pertain to this discussion there are several local discussions to have. As the economy brightens, there will be a talent reshuffle—people will finally have the stability to move employment on their own terms. High job satisfaction plays a role in Community Attachment with 18-54 year olds. However, early and mid-career folks are focused on career advancement more than community. Each community needs to know their strong drivers to be able to leverage those. What is our community narrative, essence as place, even as we evolve? Two points to consider as we contemplate and hone that message—media consumption is irrelevant and long-termed residents usually are not the most attached. This creates an opportunity to build attachment with newer residents. Mid-term residents are most attached.

We then moved to a lengthy discussion on the need to move the practice of democracy to something beyond the deficits that exist in the current system. For instance, there are new models:

- Building different skill sets in city staff and citizens
- Meeting people where they live
- Having principles for engagement (e.g., NCDD’s Seven Core Principles for Public Engagement, NLC’s *Building Democratic Governance—Tools and Structures for Engaging Citizens*)
- Two-way spaces online
- Build capacity for ad hoc civic involvement
- Link work in professional associations

All of these contain elements of strategic, local experimentation. This is not a comprehensive list. There is a language and vocabulary for the work which all participants must share. It is crucial that leadership understand and recognize the benefits of citizens working with decision-makers in communities.

There were “Poster Presentations” on Civic Grantmaking, Legal Frameworks for participation, Neighborhood Councils and other citizen structures, Online Technologies and Public Libraries. The grantmaking and legal frameworks are the support strategies with examples showcased from many parts of the country, big and small—United Way with grants in the hundreds of thousands of dollars to Grassroots Grantmaking with grants to citizens for as little as \$500. Libraries and neighborhood structures operate in communities of all sizes.

As a group we identified ten action themes to move the process of Recentering Democracy around Citizens forward.

- Connect the national associations
 - Identify the full range of associations
 - Economic justice associations, youth connections, academic, etc.
 - Review/evaluate current practices and information
 - Develop consistent, compelling message and materials
 - Link practitioners with regular interface opportunities
 - Webshare and engage
 - Actively build partnerships and connections—including unexpected connections
 - Web engagement of associations
- Support work in 5-10 communities
 - For purposes of civic learning for issue support and leadership, establish principles of Public Engagement, define terms, state rationale for practice, design and demonstrate the open and non-judgmental process
 - Report what we know in chosen communities
 - Build relationships for cohort learning among the chosen communities
 - Agree on citizen centered democracy
- Civic skills and connections for all
 - Map current process/programs/skills
 - Examples from Civic Practices network; Participedia Project
 - Tool kit of introductory training translatable to any group
 - Coaching/mentoring strategies
 - Make all adaptable
 - Identify potential partners
 - Cataloguers, practitioners, enablers
 - Those capable of embedding practice
- Change the pre-professional programs
 - Survey consumers of graduates regarding needed skill sets
 - National associations
 - Develop interface between associations and the schools—Public Administration, Planning, Social Work, Schools of Business Administrations—particularly re the team-based models, civic journalism programs, etc.
 - Develop model syllabi and/or curriculum
 - Open lines of communication with Public Administration and Planning accreditors
 - Map current programs for professionals re public engagement components
- Understand the necessary cultural shifts within institutions
 - Report shifts across place-based institutions— 10-12 examples
 - Local government as hub with relationships to higher ed, K-12, public health, public broadcasting, chambers of commerce, etc.

- Highlight professionals changing institutions
 - Teach of community change and the mentoring of that change
- Develop better language
 - Simplify the message
 - Storytelling strategies for critical lessons
 - Single term as opposed to multiple synonyms
- Improve official meetings
 - Develop a supportive legal framework for alternatives to traditional meeting formats
 - New formats for public meetings—public hearings, school boards, city councils, zoning boards, etc.
 - Utilize online technologies as well as face-to-face techniques
- Help develop “Participation 3.0”
 - Series of strategies to fully integrate online and face-to-face tools
- Develop a political analysis of this work
 - Small “p” vs large “P” in today’s public engagement
 - Develop analysis that helps communities deal with the resultant tensions
- Influence the federal advocacy agenda of the national associations
 - Recommendations for changes in federal policy to support local democracy
 - Engage advocacy staff of national organizations

We were able to develop work teams for the first five. There will be elements of the subsequent action items addressed tangentially in the work of the first five. However, it was felt that the first five actions would have the greatest impact on getting democracy recentered on citizens in a healthy and sustainable manner.

As you all know, I have been a believer in democratic governance and healthy civic engagement for many years. This was an opportunity to participate in a holistic effort to bring what, I believe, are a proper set of tools and strategies to both communities and our residents—all of whom want to build a stronger community and democracy. Although the City of Troy had no investment in my participation (expenses were covered by the McCormick Foundation), I was proud to represent our community, tell our story, and I now share some of the data and lessons I learned. I believe that use of these tools will enable us to build a stronger, healthier community as we reinvent ourselves, changing with the economy, our population and our resources.

* The Knight Foundation funded the study. The 26 communities are those communities that had Knight-Ridder papers at the time of the death of the last Knight brother. Detroit is one of those communities reflected in the data.

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