

The Promise and Challenge of Neighborhood Democracy:

Lessons from the intersection of
government and community

by Matt Leighninger

*A report on the
“Democratic Governance
at the Neighborhood Level”
meeting, organized by
Grassroots Grantmakers
and the **Deliberative
Democracy Consortium**,
with assistance from the
National League of Cities
and **NeighborWorks
America**, on November
11th, 2008, in Orlando, FL*

PREFACE

I am delighted to introduce **The Promise and Challenge of Neighborhood Democracy: Lessons from the Intersection of Government and Community**. This report grew out a meeting that Grassroots Grantmakers and the Deliberative Democracy Consortium organized in Orlando last fall with help from the National League of Cities and NeighborWorks America. **Democratic Governance at the Local Level** was the topic, with discussion focusing on what Portland, Minneapolis, Los Angeles and other cities that have experimented with creative ways to engage citizens in public decision-making and problem solving are learning.

With this report, we are continuing and hoping to expand the discussion that began in Orlando. I believe that when you read the report, you will agree that Matt Leighninger, Executive Director of Deliberative Democracy Consortium and primary author of this report, has done a wonderful job of using the questions and ideas from the meeting as a springboard for future discussion.

If you are wondering why Grassroots Grantmakers is interested in how city governments are thinking about local democracy and why we're intrigued by the possibilities associated with a wider discussion of the themes that are highlighted in this report:

- ▶ Grassroots Grantmakers is a network of place-based funders that invest in active citizenship, build civic capacity and increase community resiliency. Our roots are in philanthropy, but our vision includes local governments as important place-based funders who are currently under-represented in our community of practice.
- ▶ Many of the issues that surfaced in Orlando are the same issues that regularly surface within our network. If we're dealing with the same issues but from different perspectives, imagine the opportunities that could unfold if local government funders and place-based philanthropies could work on these issues together!
- ▶ In some places, it's not that easy to be involved, while in other places it's easier, with many "on-ramps" for active citizenship. We would love to see local governments and local philanthropies think together about how accessible active citizenship is in their community, and join together to build more on-ramps and dismantle roadblocks. We're hoping that this report will spark some of those conversations.

Many of the participants in the Orlando meeting have commented on drafts of this report. Matt and I want to offer special thanks to Terry Amsler (Collaborative Governance Initiative, Institute for Local Government, League of California Cities), Kara Carlisle (W. K. Kellogg Foundation), April Doner (SCOPE), BongHwan Kim (Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, City of Los Angeles, CA), Paul Leistner (Office of Neighborhood Initiatives, City of Portland, OR), Mark Linder (City of Cupertino, CA), Bonnie Mann (National League of Cities), Reemberto Rodriguez (NeighborWorks America), and Sergio Rodriguez (Retired City Manager, Miami Beach, FL) for their thoughtful comments.

I hope that you will read this report with an eye to continuing the discussion and share with us where the discussion leads.

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WHY THIS MEETING?

THE NEIGHBORHOOD ROOTS OF ASCENDANT, WIRED, GLOBAL DEMOCRACY

For some time, a fundamental shift in the attitudes and capacities of ordinary people has been affecting local politics. Though it has been largely overlooked by national observers, this shift has created new tensions between local officials and their constituents, and inspired a new wave of civic experimentation in local governance.

In 2008, the frustrations and political potential of active citizens became one of the central stories in an historic presidential election. By recruiting three million volunteers—and more importantly, by giving those people much more meaningful responsibilities and opportunities than in any previous presidential election—the Obama campaign tapped into, and helped to reveal, the nature of 21st Century citizenship.¹

The success of the Obama campaign, and the advent of the administration's Open Government Initiative, suddenly put citizens in the spotlight. It illuminated some of the critical questions we face:

- ▶ What kind of long-term relationship do people want with their government?
- ▶ How can temporary organizing strategies—whether they employ online technologies, or face-to-face meetings, or both—be incorporated in the way communities conduct their public business?

- ▶ Can the energy of 2008 be sustained in ways that will strengthen our democracy?

(It is important to note that the first two of these challenges were apparent well before the 2008 election; the national spotlight on these issues may fade, but citizens, public officials, and public employees will still be grappling with them for the foreseeable future.)

To answer these critical questions, we need to look at what is happening, and what could happen, in neighborhoods. There are three main reasons for this. First, the style of organizing that the Obama campaign deployed (reflecting the candidate's background as a community organizer) is a fundamentally local, even neighborhood-based approach. The tactics of network-based recruitment, small-group meetings, and citizen-led action planning (and even the use of the Internet to aid these activities) were all honed through years of work at the local and neighborhood levels.

The first practitioners of these strategies were traditional community organizers, but over the years a much broader array of local leaders, including elected officials, city managers, school administrators, planners, community foundations, and police officials, have used and adapted these tactics to engage residents in public decision-making and problem-solving.² The Obama campaign itself relied heavily on an extensive local infrastructure; the incredible scale of the effort could not have been achieved without 'boots on the ground' in thousands of neighborhoods.

DEMOCRACY IS INCREASINGLY
GLOBAL, BUT IT MAY ALSO BE
INCREASINGLY LOCAL.

Second, though the Internet has given people the chance to connect with colleagues and counterparts all over the world, some of the most dynamic applications of the new technologies are situations where online communication builds on, and complements, local connections. Online neighborhood forums, which are proliferating rapidly, illustrate some of the ways in which technology is enriching—not replacing—face-to-face interaction. “When we talk about social media, we are talking about social change that happens online AND on land,” says Allison Fine, author of *Momentum: Igniting Social Change in the Connected Age*. Democracy may be increasingly global, but it may also be increasingly local.

Finally, the experimentation with neighborhood governance that has occurred in a handful of cities over a thirty-year period represents a tremendous, and often overlooked, source of knowledge about these questions. Starting in the early 1970s, local governments in places like Portland, Oregon, Dayton, Ohio, and Saint Paul, Minnesota created neighborhood council systems as a way of engaging residents in public decision-making and problem-solving.³ The history of these neighborhood governance structures offers a rich legacy of successes, mistakes, strengths, and weaknesses that can inspire and inform democracy reform at every level of government.

These assumptions provided the rationale for a meeting entitled “Democratic Governance at the Neighborhood Level: What Have We Learned?” The gathering was held on November 11th, 2008, in conjunction with the National League of Cities conference in Orlando, Florida. The meeting focused on three neighborhood governance systems as case studies: the district

WHAT IS A “NEIGHBORHOOD”?

The word “neighborhood” still resonates with many people as a connotation for community and a way to assert pride of place. But it seems to have different meanings in different places. Some people think it is an outdated term that applies only to urban settings—or to some bygone era when neighbors interacted more often, and had more in common, than they do today. Some of the participants in this meeting still emphasized the word, highlighting it in titles like the Strong Neighborhoods Initiative or the Los Angeles Neighborhood Council system. Others seemed not to use it at all. Regardless of whether they used “neighborhood” in their work, however, the participants were all focused on ways of connecting and empowering people who live in fairly close geographical proximity to one another—while they might disagree on the rhetorical usefulness of the term, they all believed in the value of neighborhood as a way of thinking about governance and democracy.

coalitions and Office of Neighborhood Involvement in Portland, Oregon, the Neighborhood Revitalization Program of Minneapolis, Minnesota, and the Los Angeles Neighborhood Council system. In addition to the representatives of these three structures, the meeting also included elected officials from other communities, academic researchers, program officers at foundations, employees of local governments who work extensively with neighborhoods, and people representing nonprofit organizations or coalitions that work on issues of democracy and citizenship. (For a full list of participants, see Appendix 1.) The organizers of the meeting were Grassroots Grantmakers and the Deliberative Democracy

Consortium, with assistance from NeighborWorks America and the National League of Cities. (For more information on these organizations, see Bob's Rules page Appendix 2.)

The meeting participants brought with them some basic convictions about neighborhoods and democracy:

1. Neighborhoods are “where the people are”—neighborhoods aren’t the only hubs for community, but they may still be the most important ones;
2. Neighborhoods are where conflict between residents and government is on the rise—over local land use decisions, crime prevention and policing strategies, traffic, environmental concerns, school closings, and so on;
3. Neighborhoods are often where new leaders first emerge;
4. Neighborhoods are the most immediate access points for confronting a wide range of public problems—and leveraging a host of community assets;
5. Neighborhoods are where you can foster cooperation, collaboration, and public work involving residents, government, and other groups;
6. The neighborhood is at least one important arena where government “of, by, and for the people” can actually happen, on a regular, ongoing basis (rather than every once in a while, when a crisis occurs or a major decision approaches); and
7. The neighborhood is a setting where politics can be reunited with community and culture—a place where people can maintain

social connections, exercise political power, and feel like they are part of something larger than themselves.

Though they came at the topic from many different vantage points, all the meeting participants agreed that, when it comes to democracy and local governance, neighborhoods matter. The question they all faced was whether, and how, innovations in neighborhood democracy could help communities address the challenges and potential of 21st Century citizenship.

**WHEN IT COMES TO
DEMOCRACY AND
LOCAL GOVERNANCE,
NEIGHBORHOODS MATTER.**

NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL SYSTEMS: DINOSAURS OR THE WAVE OF THE FUTURE?

The ‘first wave’ of neighborhood governance structures can trace their origins to the protest movements of the 1960s and the “War on Poverty” initiated by the Johnson Administration (particularly the federal Model Cities program). It was evident that urban areas were facing some daunting challenges, and it was also clear that a new set of active citizens had emerged, challenging existing power structures, voicing their own interests and priorities, and demonstrating some of the early potential of citizen-centered governance.

Many cities responded—either on their own or through the Model Cities program—by creating new systems for decision-making at the neighborhood or ward level. They established official committees, with names like “neighborhood councils,” “priority boards,” or “neighborhood action committees,” that gave citizens a say in decisions that affect their neighborhood or ward, and sometimes on city-wide policies as well. These standing bodies have usually operated by monthly face-to-face meetings, though there are now many different variations. They have also been funded and staffed in different ways: in some cases, neighborhood councils have received city funding to hire their own staff; in other places, city employees working out of City Hall, or a district office, provided administrative assistance to the neighborhood councils. A central idea behind the creation of all of these structures was to provide a political arena, and agenda, that was open to the ideas and concerns of ordinary people. “Maximum feasible participation” was one of the key terms in the Model Cities legislation.

Many of these structures fell by the wayside in the 1980s, once the Model Cities program had ended and the funding priorities of local governments changed. Moreover, critiques of the value and effectiveness of these systems started coming in from several different quarters, most notably in a book by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan entitled *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding: Community Action in the War on Poverty*. However, a number of the systems survived, and even expanded, in the 1990s. *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy*, published in 1993, described this renaissance, responded to Moynihan’s critiques, and clarified the strengths and weaknesses of the structures in Dayton, Portland, Saint Paul, Birmingham, and San Antonio.

WHAT IS A “CITIZEN”?

The word “citizen” has a rich history in American democracy. However, it can also be a confusing word to use. Sometimes it is defined in a narrow, legal way, meaning only those people who hold U.S. passports or are eligible to vote. In this guide, we will use a broader definition: citizens are simply the people who live in that neighborhood and have a stake in its success.

Meanwhile, a ‘second wave’ of neighborhood governance structures began to emerge in the late 1990s. This second cadre is much larger and more diverse, including smaller communities like Basalt, Colorado, Roanoke, Virginia, and Santa Rosa, California, as well as large cities like Los Angeles and Houston. These developments were driven by the local dynamics of the citizen-government relationship; in most cases, a major controversy erupted over land use, budgeting, or election procedures, prompting local officials to give more power and authority to neighborhoods as a way of appeasing angry residents.⁴

The meeting on “Democratic Governance at the Neighborhood Level” focused on three of the most notable neighborhood governance systems:

- ▶ **Portland, Oregon** (*presenting*: Brian Hoop, director of the Office of Neighborhood Initiatives; Cece Hughley-Noel, Southeast Uplift; and Paul Leistner, Portland State University)—Portland is home to 95 formally recognized, independent neighborhood associations, covering the entire city. These neighborhoods are divided into seven coalitions.

tion areas. District coalition offices in each coalition area provide technical and community organizing assistance to their member neighborhood associations. The district coalitions receive funding from the City of Portland. (Five of the district coalition offices are independent nonprofits; two are staffed by city employees. All the district coalitions are directed by boards of neighborhood representatives.) The city's Office of Neighborhood Involvement (ONI) provides support services to the district coalitions, neighborhood associations, and other types of community organizations. ONI oversees the grants that provide the bulk of the coalition funding—traditionally about \$1.2 million each year total for the seven district coalition offices. Portland's system also includes 40 neighborhood business district associations. Starting in 2006, Portland's system expanded to engage city-wide community organizations that work with people of color or with immigrants and refugees. The City of Portland Office of Neighborhood Involvement funded leadership training and community organizing by these groups and began to encourage partnerships between these groups and between these groups and traditional neighborhood associations (Information excerpted from Paul Leistner, "Hopes and Challenges of Democratic Governance: Lessons from Portland, Oregon.")⁵

- ▶ **Minneapolis, Minnesota** (*presenting:* Bob Miller, director of the Neighborhood Revitalization Program, Debbie Evans, Neighbors4NRP, and Tom Bissen, Whittier Alliance)—Established in 1990 by an act of the state legislature, the Neighborhood Revitalization Program (NRP) is an investment

program that has provided millions of dollars to 72 neighborhood organizations for all kinds of public priorities, including housing, parks, commercial corridors, schools, libraries, bike paths, tree planting, and mass transit. Residents and other neighborhood stakeholders create Neighborhood Action Plans (NAPs) that describe the neighborhood they want in the future and the goals, objectives and specific strategies that will help accomplish their vision. NRP then provides funding to each neighborhood to help implement their approved plan. NRP was designed as a 20-year experiment and will run out of money in 2009; the Minneapolis City Council has voted to replace NRP with a new Department of Neighborhood and Community Relations (DNCR) and an oversight body called the Neighborhood and Community Engagement Commission (NCEC).⁶

- ▶ **Los Angeles, California** (*presenting:* Greg Nelson, former director of the Los Angeles Department of Neighborhood Empowerment)—The Los Angeles Neighborhood Council system is the largest of its kind in the nation. In 1999, Los Angeles voters approved a new City Charter that established a citywide system of neighborhood councils and created the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment to support and guide them. Currently there are 89 independent neighborhood councils throughout Los Angeles, which are organized by community leaders who want the opportunity to actively participate in city government. Neighborhood councils are official city entities; they are advisory bodies to the mayor, city council, and city departments on issues of concern in that neighbor-

hood, as well as issues that affect all of the city's residents. Each neighborhood council is allotted \$50,000 each year to spend on its own initiatives, including community beautification and outreach to the broader stakeholder base. Neighborhood councils are managed by a governing body of people from their own neighborhood who meet on a regular schedule with public input and transparency. They have the ability to select their own boundaries, choose their leaders, determine their agendas, and prioritize their needs. Leaders who volunteer to participate in the neighborhood council system go through the process, much like city elected officials, of being elected by the people in neighborhood council elections. Each year, the department, in conjunction with the neighborhood councils, hosts two Congress of Neighborhoods events. The Congresses provide neighborhood council board members and other stakeholders an opportunity to come together to network with other community leaders and gain valuable information and knowledge for the improvement of their communities. The mayor, in partnership with the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, sponsors an annual Budget Advisory Process where surveys on budget priorities are collected from thousands of stakeholders.⁷

There seemed to be broad agreement among the meeting participants that none of these three systems—or any other existing neighborhood governance structure, for that matter—represented a perfect answer to the question of how to restructure the citizen-government relationship to meet 21st Century conditions. It was clear that there were successes and

limitations that any democracy reformer could learn from. The more pertinent question might be whether these permanent systems are indeed on the right track: can we envision improved, evolved structures emerging from these civic experiments, or will these systems end up as minor offshoots, dead ends in the development of democracy? "I think we can learn some useful lessons from these communities," says Terry Amsler, director of the Collaborative Governance Initiative at the League of California Cities. "But ultimately I wonder if they are going to survive. Are these 'permanent structures' the wave of the future, or are they really dinosaurs?"⁸

As the meeting participants grappled with this question and discussed the main lessons from the three presentations, they named a number of strengths and weaknesses of neighborhood council systems:

Strength: Neighborhood councils give a much broader array of people a legitimate voice in public decisions made at the neighborhood and local levels; they tend to have strong roles—sometimes formal, sometimes informal—in policymaking, and some receive various kinds of funding from City Hall.

Weakness: Many neighborhood councils were originally envisioned as mini-city councils, and they often replicate the limitations and disadvantages of city councils—but with fewer resources and less authority.

Strength: Though they are a legitimate part of the local policymaking process, most neighborhood councils seem to remain independent from the process and from City Hall; they can provide what Paul Leistner calls "a formally recognized community organizing vehicle."

Weakness: The set of people involved in the typical neighborhood council is generally not as diverse—by age, race, income, or other demographic variables—as the neighborhood they represent. In some places, community organizations that have more diverse memberships now vie with neighborhood councils for access, legitimacy, and funding.

Strength: Neighborhood councils can provide accessible ‘on-ramps’ to participation for people who might not otherwise see themselves as participants in governmental processes or decision-making.

Weaknesses: Neighborhood councils can provide another roadblock to participation unless they are designed, and operate, with the goal of increasing rather than just managing participation.

Strength: Some neighborhood councils are able to recruit large, diverse numbers of people, particularly for special meetings on timely issues.

Weakness: Most of the time, most neighborhood councils are not particularly successful at recruitment, find it particularly hard to attract people to regular monthly meetings, and now rely on a very small core of volunteers.

Strength: Some neighborhood councils have adopted very participatory, productive meeting formats; instead of Robert’s Rules of Order, they use “Bob’s Rules” (see back cover).

Weakness: Many neighborhood councils continue to use traditional meeting formats (such as Robert’s Rules). The jargon, strict procedures, and inattention to storytelling and personal experience that are evident in these formats makes them particularly unwelcoming to younger people, more recent immigrants, and

others who have not typically been involved in local politics.

Strength: Many neighborhood councils are engines of “public work”: they have produced all kinds of tangible outcomes through collaboration with City Hall and other groups and also through their own volunteer effort and energy.⁹

Weakness: News of these tangible outcomes, and how they came about, is often not communicated in an adequate or systematic way, either within the neighborhood or across the larger community.

Strength: Many neighborhood council systems are effective at getting informed, detailed input from residents to their city councils, zoning boards, school boards, and other decision-making bodies—this makes for smarter policy and often seems to defuse controversies before they arise.

Weakness: The expectations for how local officials will use the input they receive are often unclear, and lines of accountability between neighborhood councils and City Hall are often blurry—leading to frustrations on both sides.

Strength: Some systems create connections between leaders of different neighborhoods and create opportunities for them to work together on decisions or projects that affect the whole community.

Weakness: In most cases, this cross-neighborhood collaboration is limited to a smaller number of neighborhood leaders. Cultural differences between neighborhoods sometimes make communication and cooperation more difficult. Furthermore, even though most public issues are

ROBERT’S RULES OF ORDER
VS. “BOB’S RULES”

now regional in nature, the notion of collaboration among neighborhoods across a metropolitan area is still largely unexplored.

Strength: There are now some interesting examples of online technologies being used to facilitate and strengthen discussion, deliberation, and action planning within particular neighborhoods.¹⁰

Weakness: Most of the experimentation in online neighborhood networks has not been connected with, or supported by, formal neighborhood council systems. Most neighborhood councils continue to rely almost exclusively on face-to-face meetings and have not explored online strategies that could complement and enrich their current efforts.

Strength: Advocates of longstanding neighborhood council systems often say that the work has changed the culture of the community, making dialogue and collaboration a powerful public habit.

Weakness: Critics say that these democratic habits are apparent only among the people involved in the councils, rather than the general public—and that expanding and sustaining this sense of collaborative culture requires a great deal of planning and persistence.¹¹

OTHER APPROACHES TO NEIGHBORHOOD GOVERNANCE

In addition to the permanent neighborhood structures, there were two other approaches to neighborhood governance represented in the room. First, some of the meeting participants had helped to organize temporary, large-scale initia-

tives that enabled residents to address a major public issue. These kinds of efforts have been led by many different types of organizations, and are usually supported by a broad coalition of groups. Sometimes the sessions are spread over several weeks, sometimes they take place in a single day. Most of these projects aim to engage a diverse critical mass of people in a neighborhood or all across a community.

Second, many of the participants had been involved with government-led efforts to involve residents in specific policy decisions. These activities are similar to temporary organizing initiatives in the sense that they are tied to a policy debate that usually subsides once the decision has been made; however, they are different in that the public officials and employees may come back to the community again on the same or other issues in the future—there is some kind of ongoing commitment by government to working more intensively with the public.

In the last fifteen years, both of these other approaches to neighborhood governance have proliferated even more rapidly than the neighborhood council systems. Face-to-face meetings are still the most common type of interaction in these efforts, but the use of online formats is rising dramatically. Both the temporary organizing efforts and the government-initiated projects are just as dependent on local political dynamics as the more permanent structures.¹²

Just like the neighborhood council systems, these community- or government-initiated organizing efforts are experiments in local democracy, but they are rarely described in those terms. They are focused on issue-related goals, such as: resolving a school redistricting question; balancing a city budget; making land use decisions; address-

ing racism and race relations; or preventing crime. (These are usually, but not always, community-wide rather than neighborhood-focused efforts.)

Overall, these other two approaches seem to have certain advantages over the permanent council systems, particularly in the areas of recruitment and group process techniques such as facilitation, issue framing, and action planning. But they have disadvantages as well: the recurring government-led initiatives have the strongest connection to the policymaking process, but they are often narrowly focused on the policy questions of the moment, and do not encourage residents to devote their own energy and time to solving broader public problems. The temporary projects sometimes have greater difficulty affecting policymaking processes, but probably their greatest shortcoming is simply that they are temporary—even in situations where they’ve been extremely successful and have produced a range of tangible outcomes, they often don’t lead to structured, long-term changes in the way citizens and governments interact.¹³ During the meeting, there seemed to be some agreement that combining the strengths of all these approaches might be the most promising path for innovation.

TENSIONS IN NEIGHBORHOOD DEMOCRACY

Following the presentations of the Portland, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis examples, the participants shifted to a broader conversation about the challenges and opportunities they

were facing in their work. This discussion incorporated the experiences of all three approaches to neighborhood governance.

A number of interesting tensions emerged in the conversation:

Shared governance or just blurred governance?

Some of the presentations on the permanent structures emphasized the ways in which those systems had helped residents “get rid of” drug dealers, prostitutes, and other people deemed undesirable to the neighborhood. Other meeting participants objected to this language, and began to raise questions about equity and gentrification. “Aren’t prostitutes citizens too?” one person asked. Others argued that moving criminal activity out of the neighborhood simply shifted the burden to other neighborhoods, without addressing the underlying causes of crime.

“AREN’T PROSTITUTES CITIZENS TOO?”

There seemed to be an underlying tension in this discussion around who, exactly, was being empowered by these permanent neighborhood structures. In the view of some participants, giving small, homogeneous sets of “professional citizens” a greater degree of control over public policies and local problem-solving efforts might actually be detrimental to neighborhood democracy, and to the interests of younger, poorer, or less educated residents. In some cases, public officials may even be using the neighborhood councils to avoid having to acknowledge or consider the ideas or concerns put forward by other residents. “If we just give power to independent neighborhood groups, we may alienate or harm those on the fringes,” one person argued. Ques-

tions of race were also lurking in this discussion, as participants described situations where organizations made up mostly of people of color—predominantly African-American or Hispanic church congregations, for example—were at odds with neighborhood councils made up primarily of white residents.

This discussion illustrates the two sides of decentralized public decision-making. When local government delegates responsibilities and legitimizes active citizens, neighborhoods may be better able to tap into their own resources and direct public services in ways that are more helpful to residents. Proponents call this relationship “shared governance.” On the other hand, if neighborhood leaders are not themselves operating in democratic ways, the result might actually be ‘blurred’ governance, where the lines of accountability are increasingly unclear, and disadvantaged residents have even less power and control over the decisions that affect their lives.

The ‘involvers’ vs. the ‘involved’—Another interesting tension centered on situations where local government employees had been successful in engaging a much broader, more diverse set of residents. The meeting participants who worked for local or county government seemed to have a great deal of process knowledge, and shared long lists of tips and techniques. It was clear that these professionals had had success involving “under-represented groups” in addition to “the usual suspects.” They took pride in their work, felt it deserved more support, and spoke with some frustration of the need to win more funding and legitimacy for their efforts within City Hall. “Our greatest challenge,” one person argued, “is building the political will necessary to support creating more independent, participatory structures.”

There was, however, a strong reaction to this argument from a set of participants who felt that it positioned public employees as the “involvers,” and everyone else as the “involved.” This framework, they felt, put citizens in a more passive, reactive, less powerful role, and ceded authority and initiative to government. “There is a basic, recurring problem in our field,” one person said, “of professionals prematurely taking on that role [of involver] as well as neglecting to recognize both the capacity and the importance of residents themselves playing that role.” As a result, many public involvement efforts seem to overemphasize the needs of policymakers—and minimize the voices of citizens. A few of the process tips seemed almost to infantilize residents: one suggestion was that organizers “not only provide food for the meetings, but make sure it is visible from the doorway.”

SUBTLE VARIATIONS IN THE ATTITUDES OF ORGANIZERS: “MAKE THE EXPERIENCE WELCOMING AND PRODUCTIVE” VS. “MAKE SURE THE FOOD IS VISIBLE FROM THE DOORWAY.”

For similar reasons, this set of participants also pushed back against the pitch for more funding to support involvement work by public employees. “Money should follow engagement, not other way round,” one person said.

One aspect of this dispute about the ‘involvers’ and the ‘involved’ seemed to center on who should “own” and direct democratic governance. The public employees in the group believed they were doing critical democracy-building work. Some of the other participants were worried that

“engagement” was being consolidated, in some cases, as a purely governmental service. Even in the most successful efforts, attracting the widest variety of people, it was unclear to these critics whether the work was actually creating democratic spaces for citizens, or simply making the policymaking process somewhat more informed, somewhat easier, and somewhat less contentious. Are residents being engaged, or simply managed?

Another aspect of this tension had to do with money as a sign of legitimacy and government responsiveness. Many participants were concerned about democratic governance structures or strategies that fail to give residents any meaningful say on how funding and services are allocated. These participants agreed that “People only get engaged when they have control of resources,” and that if the involvement had no effect on how money was spent, then it simply wasn’t authentic.

Both aspects of the discussion suggested the need to rethink the roles and expectations for the ‘involvers’ and the ‘involved.’ If this dispute is any indication, it may be that public employees who do involvement work are too focused on the “political will” of public officials and not attentive enough to the “public will” of the community as a whole—and that to strengthen this public will in favor of participatory local democracy, communities need to make ‘involving’ a more broadly shared, jointly owned activity rather than a professional practice.

Democratic leadership in a republican system—

A third topic that attracted considerable attention had to do with leadership and leadership training. Many of the meeting participants cited the ways in which training could help people shift from the “old model” of decision-making

(described as “decide and defend” or “tell and sell”) to a more democratic model that emphasized “listening and building joint consensus.” Participants talked of the need to help new leaders learn how to recruit residents, facilitate meetings, plan collaboratively, ‘frame’ issues for discussion, and manage volunteers. Training was seen as a logical supplement for neighborhood governance activities, which can provide a key stepping stone for emerging leaders to ‘find their voices,’ make connections, and learn new skills.

It was also clear that the expansion of leadership training had run up against some unforeseen challenges. First of all, some participants mentioned the fact that “many people in formal leadership positions [public officials and others] never had leadership training of any kind”—and that new neighborhood leaders often faced this “culture clash” between the way they were being trained to operate and the prevailing leadership practices in City Hall, and in local politics generally.

Second, some participants argued that public officials viewed leadership training, and neighborhood governance efforts generally, as a threat more than an asset. According to the participants, some officials felt that encouraging new leaders might simply create new political rivals: “Why help to build up the person who’s just going to run against me in the next election?”

Finally, a few participants described scenarios in which neighborhood leaders moved

“WE’VE BEEN DEVELOPING BETTER PRACTICES, WHILE (IN MOST CASES) TREATING THE STRUCTURES AS A GIVEN. BUT THE STRUCTURES NEED TO REFLECT THE PRACTICES.”

on to elected or appointed positions in local government—and promptly “forgot” the more democratic leadership practices they had been trained to use. These new leaders claimed to be the voice of their neighborhoods or constituencies, but they didn’t directly involve those constituents in decision-making. It wasn’t clear to the meeting participants (and it is not clear to other observers and researchers) what is driving this dynamic. It may be that the structures and processes of governing play an even stronger role in affecting behavior than we realize, and that newly elected leaders are more likely to adapt to the system than try to make the system adapt to them and their neighborhoods.

These claims suggest that training people in “democratic” skills is a valuable activity—but one which may be at odds with the political realities of a “republican” system. “We need to reframe this work,” said one participant. “We’ve been developing better practices, while (in most cases) treating the structures as a given. But the structures need to reflect the practices.”

Democracy and community—There was also a great deal of interest in the interplay between democracy and community. Through their work to engage residents, many of the meeting participants had realized the importance of providing social and cultural reasons—food, music, time to socialize, chances to interact with young people or praise their achievements—for residents to take part in meetings or associations.¹⁴

Participants also pointed out that the failure to build community had created competition between neighborhood councils and other kinds of neighborhood groups. The smaller, homogeneous, overtly political councils were encounter-

ing resistance from groups that had community at their core—churches, clubs, ethnic associations—and were beginning to assert themselves in the political realm. Because these emerging groups provided their constituents with more reasons to participate, their memberships were often larger than the number of people involved in the councils—and therefore they could claim to represent a more authentic neighborhood voice to city council and other decision makers.

Other participants argued that while these other neighborhood groups might sometimes attract larger numbers of people, they usually weren’t any more participatory or deliberative than the neighborhood councils. In Portland, the city council has voted to acknowledge and fund ethnic and cultural organizations representing “traditionally under-represented groups” in the same way they have supported district councils in the past. During the meeting, participants wondered whether these organizations could, or should, be required to follow guidelines designed to ensure that they were actually engaging larger numbers of people in democratic ways.

Overall, the meeting participants agreed that we “need a better understanding of the connections between, and principles for, democracy and community-building.” There was broad support for the contention that, ultimately, “community

ARE THE ‘INVOLVERS’ CREATING LIMITED, PURELY POLITICAL ARENAS OR BROADER, MORE WELCOMING AND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY SPACES?

can exist without democracy—but democracy can't exist without community." The problem, many of them believed, was that local governments and other 'involvers' who didn't understand these connections were creating limited, purely political arenas rather than broader, more welcoming and sustainable community spaces. They pointed to history and language as two critical elements. "Neighbors need to feel that their stories (and history) are known and valued," or the political opportunities they are given will seem superficial and temporary. And when 'involvers' use terms like 'empower' and 'give' they may be inadvertently be minimizing the role of residents, and giving them the sense that if they enter into public life, they will be there merely as the guests of government.

Top-down or bottom-up? Given these difficulties, some participants wondered whether trying to create new structures for citizens was a good idea after all. One participant asked: "Are we falling prey to our own 'social engineering,' self-serving approach?" In some cases, experimenting with neighborhood governance 'from the top down' seemed to have created structures that were too inflexible and government-directed to allow any room for community ownership or neighborhood initiative. In other places, a more 'bottom-up' approach seemed to have created a "parallel system—another level of government" that was culturally incompatible with City Hall and the official political process.

As the participants grappled with these challenges, they seemed to gain some clarity on the 'top-down' vs. 'bottom-up' question. Participants noted that the most successful examples of neighborhood governance—whether they were permanent structures or more temporary organizing

efforts—seemed to illustrate the power of people moving in both directions. The belief that "change needs to come from both 'bottom-up' and 'top-down,'" seemed to strike a chord in the room. The most promising arenas for public life would be ones that were created jointly, or at least had enthusiastic support, by both community leaders and neighborhood residents. "Basically, we need something in between traditional city council meetings and happenstance barbershop talk," said one participant.

The participants also reaffirmed the need to keep going—to keep learning from past lessons, keep trying new innovations, and keep experimenting with neighborhood governance. Not every experiment will be successful, but letting things stand as they are is not an option either. As one person put it, "Will democracy flourish if you leave it alone? Probably not."

**"WILL DEMOCRACY FLOURISH
IF YOU LEAVE IT ALONE?
PROBABLY NOT."**

BETWEEN CITY HALL AND THE BARBERSHOP: NEW DIRECTIONS FOR NEIGHBORHOOD DEMOCRACY

The "Democratic Governance at the Neighborhood Level" meeting gave us a fairly comprehensive look at the main achievements of people working in the realm of neighborhood governance, as well as the main challenges that lie ahead. The lessons they have learned should be reassuring to local

leaders and others who are grappling with the seismic shift in citizen attitudes and capacities. Furthermore, some of the interesting tensions that emerged in the conversation can help us envision more vital, sustainable structures for neighborhood democracy.

Conclusion 1: “We know how to do a lot of this stuff.” The most obvious finding of the meeting was that some of the most common, basic worries about involving citizens are unfounded. The concerns that “we don’t know how to bring a diverse set of people to the table,” or that “we don’t want to set up yet another shouting match” are not the main challenges we face. By and large, the participants in this meeting knew how to answer those initial questions, and a number of others, through the application of:

- ▶ process knowledge about recruitment
- ▶ process knowledge about running meetings (giving people a chance to feel heard, and keeping outspoken participants from dominating the discussion)
- ▶ knowledge about how to encourage and coordinate public work
- ▶ leadership training to impart process knowledge to a broader array of people

There was a great deal of confidence in the room that residents could almost always be involved in effective and meaningful ways, at least within the confines of a particular issue or decision during a specific period of time. As one person put it, “we know how to do a lot of this stuff.”

The meeting participants—and most of the other experienced practitioners in this field—have moved on to the next set of obstacles. The current frontiers for neighborhood gover-

nance have more to do with structural, long-term challenges, such as:

Conclusion 2—This work has to be jointly “owned” and directed. Some of the difficulties and tensions in the meeting centered on the question of who ought to be in charge of, and accountable for, neighborhood governance work. It was evident that every community needed people with the kinds of skills listed above, but there were no easy or universally applicable answers to the question of how the people with those skills ought to be supported, funded, and legitimized. Should public employees working out of City Hall, or district offices, be the main neighborhood governance workers? Or should neighborhood leaders, either through paid positions or volunteer efforts, be doing most of the work?

The consensus seemed to be that either of these variations (and others) might work as long as a broad array of neighborhood and community organizations and leaders, along with public officials and employees, all had some significant degree of ownership and authority within the system. In most communities, the first, most basic step in building this joint ownership might be to begin convening the various kinds of ‘involvers’ who are working at either the neighborhood or city level to engage citizens in different arenas for decision-making and problem-solving. Those people ought to then begin talking with neighborhood leaders and community organizations. As this conversation unfolds, and as people explore different options for neighborhood governance, the main question on the table ought to be “What’s in this for citizens?” How can these spaces or opportunities affirm and support the capacity of citizens to help improve their neighborhoods and communities? And what other reasons—be they social, cultural, or political—

will compel people to take part in public/community life?

Conclusion 3—We need ways to ensure that democratic practices are being used by neighborhood leaders and groups. Even though the meeting participants felt that, when it comes to productively involving residents, “we know how to do a lot of this stuff,” the participants also felt that most neighborhoods still aren’t using much of that process knowledge. For a variety of reasons, neighborhood council members and other neighborhood leaders are still operating in fairly undemocratic ways—and this propensity is contributing to the problems and tensions relating to equity, community, and leadership.

Three ways of dealing with this challenge surfaced at the meeting:

- ▶ Developing new mechanisms for tracking, measuring, and reinforcing accountability in neighborhood governance. In most places, it is difficult to find even the basic facts about involvement processes: How many people came to a particular meeting? How were they recruited or notified? How well did those people match the demographic mix of the neighborhood? How was the meeting run? What were the main recommendations to emerge? What did the city commit to doing, and what did the neighborhood groups commit to? Cities and neighborhoods which can keep track of these basic details, and make them available on the Internet, might build in incentives for neighborhood leaders to recruit more broadly and run their meetings more democratically. This approach would also put more pressure on City Hall, neighborhood groups, and other organizations to follow up on the commitments they make.
- ▶ Several participants mentioned the need for a multi-pronged strategy: providing a number of different “on-ramps” to participation in public life, rather than relying solely on neighborhood councils or any other structure. Different approaches are needed to meet the diverse interests and priorities of residents, and to engage people “where they are,” on their own terms.
- ▶ With such a system in place, public officials, public employees, and other leaders would be in a better position to encourage and expect democratic practices by neighborhoods. Some cities, like Los Angeles, already have accreditation processes for neighborhood councils, but those systems focus mainly on legal requirements like California’s Brown Act rather than considerations that would reinforce democratic practices. A related idea that emerged in the meeting was for local governments and neighborhoods to agree on “memos of understanding” about how they were going to operate.
- ▶ Some of the meeting participants reacted strongly to any measure that would try to “enforce” the use of democratic practices by neighborhood councils or other groups. They felt that a more promising answer was leadership training that provided those skills—and particularly training programs that included public employees and public officials along with neighborhood leaders. These kinds of joint training programs, like the one operated by the Neighbors Building Neighborhoods initiative in Rochester, New York, might help make democratic practices more prevalent within government, not just in neighborhoods.

Conclusion 4—We need those democratic practices to be applied in the workings of government—not just neighborhoods.

This recommendation about joint training was part of a larger sentiment that successful neighborhood governance relied in part on more effective city-wide governance. Many of the tensions that emerged in the meeting related to the difficulty of maintaining ‘pockets’ of democracy—in neighborhood settings, or in temporary processes dealing with a particular issue or decision—within communities that tend to operate in more undemocratic ways. There were three ideas that had currency among the meeting participants:

- ▶ Providing democratic skills, and more facilitative understanding of leadership, to public officials and other public employees, rather than just a select group of public engagement specialists.
- ▶ Changing the way public meetings (city council proceedings, school board meetings, land use hearings, and so on) are run, so that they foster more deliberation and give more people a chance to be heard.
- ▶ Developing new mechanisms that will connect neighborhood structures with city-wide decision-making.

It is important to note that while the meeting participants were enthusiastic about providing new democratic spaces and opportunities for citizens, they did not have any illusions about full participation: they did not entertain visions of democracy in which 100% of the population is involved, on every issue or decision, 100% of the time. They were, however, convinced of the need to expand participation—not only in terms of numbers, but of diversity—far beyond current levels. Even 10% of a neighborhood or commu-

nity, provided it was a relatively representative group, could be an enormously valuable and catalytic force.

The participants also felt that dramatically expanding participation—whether to 10% or to any other target—would require a broader array of involvement opportunities than most communities currently offer. Regular monthly meetings might continue to be the mainstay of neighborhood councils and other groups, but as one participant put it, “we can’t privilege the meeting as the only place for making decisions.” Successful neighborhood governance will probably require a more “layered” approach in which residents can participate in monthly meetings, larger gatherings held every few months, online forums, and other kinds of events.

The conclusions and ideas that emerged from the meeting seemed to suggest a richer, more nuanced vision of neighborhood democracy: a more complete answer to what citizens want from their government (or, more accurately, from jointly supported public life). This vision was built around seven core ideas:

1. “Democracy needs **a place to sit down**”¹⁵—and to enjoy food, music, culture, and conversation.
2. Those democratic spaces should be **powerful**: arenas where citizens can bring concerns, build on assets, affect policy decisions, and work with government and with one another.
3. Those democratic spaces should be **natural hubs for community**: they may be situated in neighborhoods, but they may also be centered on schools, workplaces, online networks, and other places “where the people are.”

4. Those democratic spaces should be **jointly supported, funded, and legitimized** by local government, civic associations, foundations, and other groups—but above all, they must be “owned” by the citizens who sustain them.
5. **Process is important:** truly democratic spaces require proactive recruitment practices in order to reach people who have felt shut out of public decision-making, or who don’t feel that public life is “for them;” and formats that give people the chance to learn, share experiences, consider policy options, and—above all—to feel that their opinions matter.
6. Maintaining democratic spaces requires **democratic skills**—recruitment, facilitation, framing, action planning, volunteer management—and citizens and public employees need opportunities to learn and hone these skills together.
7. Democratic **governance** requires more democratic **government:** flattened hierarchies that work across silos and are agile enough to respond to, and partner with, citizens.

APPENDIX 1: MEETING PARTICIPANTS

Susan	Ajoc	City of St. Petersburg, FL
Terry	Amsler	Institute for Local Government
Ellen	Ayo	City of Clearwater, FL
Bill	Barnes	National League of Cities
Tom	Bissen	Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program
Henrietta	Davis	City of Cambridge, MA
Tiana	Davis	Neighborhood Services Division, Orange County, FL
April	Doner	SCOPE, Sarasota, FL
Tim	Dutton	SCOPE, Sarasota, FL
Debbie	Evans	Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program
Marilyn	Fenton-Harmer	Housing & Neighborhoods Dept, City of Jacksonville
Maria	Figueras	Neighborhood Services Division, Orange County, FL
Janis	Foster	Grassroots Grantmakers
Kevin	Frazell	League of Minnesota Cities
Peter	Gorski	Children's Board of Hillsborough County
Art	Hall	Neighborhood Services Division, Orange County, FL
Susan	Harris	City of Orlando
Beverly	Hill	The University of South Florida
Jim	Holgersson	City of Arlington, TX
Brian	Hoop	City of Portland, OR
Marcia	Hope Goodwin	City of Orlando, FL
Cece	Hughley-Noel	Southeast Uplift
Wes	Johnson	Neighborhood Services Division, Orange County, FL

Jeff	Kronsnabl	City of Clearwater, FL
Laura	Lam	San Jose Redevelopment Agency
Matt	Leighninger	Deliberative Democracy Consortium
Paul	Leistner	Center for Public Participation, Portland State University
Mark	Linder	City of Cupertino, CA
Bonnie	Mann	National League of Cities
Carla	McLendon	Neighborhood Services Division, Orange County, FL
Bob	Miller	Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program
Greg	Nelson	CityWatch
Cynthia	Newell	Neighborhood Leadership Initiative
Michelle	Owens	Neighborhood Services Division, Orange County, FL
Beverly	Perry	Bedrosian Center for Governance and the Public Enterprise, University of Southern California
Allison	Pinto	CommuniPlexity Initiative
Reemberto	Rodriguez	NeighborWorks America
Janice	Rombeck	San Jose Redevelopment Agency
Kathy	Smith	New Hampshire Humanities Council
Monica	Spires	Neighborhood Services Division, Orange County, FL
Khalil	Tian Shahyd	New Orleans Citizen Participation Project
Julie	Tindall	City of Orlando
Lynn	Tipton	League of Florida Cities
Carol	Westmoreland	League of Florida Cities
Lavon	Williams	Neighborhood Services Division, Orange County, FL
Gwen	Wright	Change Matters

ENDNOTES

1. Harry Boyte has described the civic elements of the Obama campaign in several of his writings, including “The Work Before Us is Our Work, Not Just His,” *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, May 3, 2009.
2. For a much more in-depth description of these developments, see Matt Leighninger, *The Next Form of Democracy: How Expert Rule is Giving Way to Shared Governance—And Why Politics Will Never Be the Same* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006).
3. The best description of the first wave of neighborhood council systems is *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy*, by Jeffrey Berry, Kent Portney, and Ken Thomson (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1993).
4. See Chapter 8, “Sharing the Buck: Communities Rethink Public Finances and Public Responsibilities,” in Leighninger, *The Next Form of Democracy*.
5. Information provided by Paul Leistner; for more, see Leistner and Amalia Alarcon de Morris, “From Neighborhood Association System to Participatory Democracy—A Broadening and Deepening Public Involvement in Portland, Oregon,” forthcoming in *National Civic Review*.
6. For more, see www.npr.org.
7. Thanks to BongHwan Kim, Director of the Los Angeles Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, for this information; for more, see www.lacityneighborhoods.com.
8. Amsler’s Collaborative Governance Initiative is a great resource on democratic governance issues and challenges—see www.cacities.org/index.jsp?zone=ilsg§ion=coll.
9. For a more comprehensive description of “public work,” see Harry Boyte and Nan Kari, *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work* (Temple University Press, 1996).
10. See Steven Clift, “Sidewalks for Democracy Online,” in *Rebooting America* (Personal Democracy Press, 2008) or at <http://stevenclift.com/?p=152>.
11. See Archon Fung and Elena Fagotto, “Sustaining Public Engagement: Embedded Deliberation in Local Communities,” forthcoming from the Kettering Foundation.
12. Projects initiated by government often get off the ground sooner, and they are often better able to attract a broad range of supporting organizations, at least at first. On the other hand, these projects can be polarizing—residents may perceive (rightly or wrongly) that a strong government role means that public officials are trying to advance a “City Hall agenda,” rather than welcoming a range of different views to the table.
13. These projects are almost always focused on a policy issue or decision, rather than the health of local democracy writ large, and so the participants generally spend little or no time talking about what a more productive, sustained relationship between citizens and government might look like. These limitations of temporary organizing efforts inspire some of the interest in neighborhood council systems; the limitations of neighborhood councils generate interest in the temporary efforts.
14. One of the most advanced examples of a neighborhood structure that incorporates social and cultural components is the Jane Addams School for Democracy in Saint Paul, Minnesota. See www.janeaddamsschool.org.
15. This quote is popularly attributed to the political theorist Hannah Arendt.

Bob's Rules

(ROBERT'S KINDER, GENTLER SIBLING)

Respect other people, their ideas and opinions.

Do not interrupt others.

Try to say it in 25 words or less.

Speak only to the topic at hand.

No side conversations.

When an idea has been stated previously and you agree, only speak when you have something new to add.

Everyone gets a chance to share their opinion before someone speaks again.

Speaking briefly and staying focused is everyone's responsibility. This will make the meeting run smoothly.

These are everybody's rules and everyone is responsible for seeing that they are followed.

[Provided by Cece Hughley-Noel, Southeast Uplift]

THE HOST ORGANIZATIONS

GRASSROOTS GRANTMAKERS



Grassroots Grantmakers is a network of place-

based funders in the United States and Canada that are working from a “**we begin with residents**” perspective—supporting active citizenship to build social capital and civic capacity at the block level in their communities. Grassroots Grantmakers serves as a locus of learning about grassroots grantmaking and as an advocate for the practice of grassroots grantmaking as an essential component of effective place-based philanthropy. Constituents include community foundations, independent and family foundations, corporate funders, United Ways, local governments, local funding intermediaries and other community-based funders.

► www.grassrootsgrantmakers.org

NEIGHBORWORKS AMERICA

NeighborWorks® America is a national nonprofit organization created by Congress to provide financial support, technical assistance, and training for community-based revitalization efforts. NeighborWorks America, local NeighborWorks organizations and Neighborhood Housing Services of America make up the *NeighborWorks system*, which has successfully built healthy communities since 1978. Together with national and local partners, NeighborWorks creates new opportunities for residents while improving communities.

► www.nw.org

DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY CONSORTIUM



The Deliberative Democracy Consortium (DDC)

is a network of practitioners and researchers, representing more than 50 organizations and universities, collaborating to strengthen the field of deliberative democracy. The mission of the Consortium, which was founded in 2002, is to support research activities and advance practice at all levels of government, in North America and around the world.

► www.deliberative-democracy.net

NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES

The National League of Cities is the oldest and largest national organization representing municipal governments throughout the United States. Its mission is to strengthen and promote cities as centers of opportunity, leadership, and governance. Working in partnership with the 49 state municipal leagues, the National League of Cities serves as a resource to and an advocate for the more than 19,000 cities, villages, and towns it represents. More than 1,600 municipalities of all sizes pay dues to NLC and actively participate as leaders and voting members in the organization.

► www.nlc.org