

## NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT

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Events over the past year, from the election of 2000 to the tragedy of September 11, have changed how we think about and practice politics in this country. Easy assumptions of endless economic expansion amid ever-rising stock prices, ensured by an end to history, belong to another time. We have been forcibly reminded of the imprudence of complacency and the necessity of continuous engagement in a world where such hazards breed. We have learned again that politics, as it has always been, is a collective activity in which what is at stake extends to the most basic and ultimate of values and ends.

It has often been said that in light of September 11 everything is now different. In some sense this must be true, but we are still closer to the beginning than the end of what has begun. Whatever else has changed, each of us has been led to reassess the value we place on the things we regard as important. New circumstances change our sense of the relative importance of our various desires, objectives, and ends in comparison with one another.

This refocusing on the things that matter seems to have reconfirmed for many that, although they are not rescue workers and not in the military, what they do nevertheless makes an important contribution to the overall richness of our democratic society. There have been recurring anecdotes in the media about people from diverse vocations coming to this viewpoint after wrestling with their sense of how what they do matters in these times. People who are actively involved in community improvement efforts may not have previously experienced quite the same degree of concern about the value of their particular work. But the changed world we now inhabit and the new level of urgency conferred upon our politics should encourage us all to think more deeply about the kind of society we want to create and about how we can improve our efforts to do so.

In some small way, we hope that this issue of the *National Civic Review* makes a contribution to this process. Civic participation, community engagement, and collaborative decision making are all important values that guide the work of the National Civic League, as well as that of numerous other organizations concerned with reenergizing a dynamic and vibrant civil society and democratic polity. This issue of the *Review* recognizes some of the most interesting work being done by community movements and contains articles by leading practitioners on the promise heralded by convergence among these movements.

Community-level reform movements of all kinds have become a significant part of the political landscape across the United States. With the benefit of generous assistance from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the National Civic League and the Coalition for Healthier Cities and Communities convened a series of dialogues over the past year in six locations around the country. The

purpose of this project was to assess the prospects for convergence among several of the community movements that have been most influential over the last decade. There are important differences among these groups, as is indicated by their descriptors: healthy communities, sustainable communities, livable communities, and so on. But there are areas of commonality as well that are the basis for sharing ideas and practices and that might lead to something that could be called a “communities movement.”

The framing article by Kesler and O’Connor describes the communities project and gives some interesting detail about a new developmental stage, something they call the next stage of the civic sector. Community change work often requires both a neutral convener who can bring people together and a safe space for dialogue among participants. As the civic sector becomes more developed, this combination is being institutionalized in ways that enable communities to consolidate the advances they make and develop the capacity needed to sustain and extend their work.

Jacksonville Community Council Inc. (JCCI), in Florida, is one of the most well-established community organizations in the country; it is an excellent example of this next stage in the development of the civic sector. The article by David Swain, associate director of JCCI, takes an insightful look at the obstacles and opportunities encountered in a community improvement project and draws on JCCI’s experience to illustrate these observations. An ongoing JCCI project deals with community indicators, which is a topic of widely shared concern across community movements.

The article by Randa Gahin and Chris Paterson presents a historical overview of community indicators work and assesses where the field is today. Finally, the article by Becky Miles-Polka details an innovative model being developed in Des Moines, Iowa, that takes an investment-based approach to human service delivery.

Taken together, the articles in this issue showcase the innovative activity of community movements and chart the path of future development. The public deliberation and civic participation that these movements engender are essential resources for our democratic republic. Governments at all levels—federal, state, and local—confront problems that they cannot resolve on their own even if there is political agreement to act upon them. Citizen engagement, through deliberation and action, can bring new ideas and capacities to bear. As politics is about shaping the society in which we live, an active citizenry can enlarge the scope of what is possible and help create a desirable world. The strength of community movements, acting independently and in concert with one another, is an encouraging sign of collective rededication to our enduring political ideals.

CHRISTOPHER T. GATES  
PRESIDENT, NATIONAL CIVIC LEAGUE