The New Laboratories of Democracy

How Local Government Is Reinventing Civic Engagement. Part One: Structure and Form

In their book *Better Together,* Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein trace an upswing in civic activity in Portland, Oregon, to adoption of a more neighborhood-friendly posture on the part of local government in the mid-1970s. Before 1975, when the mayor created an Office of Neighborhood Associations to bridge the gap between citizens and government, Portlanders were no more civically engaged than the rest of the country.

By the early 1990s, however, the number of locals who reported attending at least one public meeting within the last year had jumped from 21 percent to 30–35 percent, while the average for the country dropped from 22 percent to 11 percent. Letter writing to the local newspaper was on the rise in Portland, as was the likelihood that a citizen would be serving on a local board or committee. “In Portland, government officials have evolved a culture of adaptation and accommodation,” concluded the authors. “Just as citizens honed their civic skills and vociferously pressed their views, government developed a culture of responding to and learning from, rather than rejecting many grassroots initiatives” (2003, p. 242).

More than thirty years after the Office of Neighborhood Associations was established, Portland continues to look for more and better ways to engage. In the meantime, many other communities have joined the quest. In Northampton, Massachusetts, the city council created an Ad Hoc Committee for Best Practices in Decision Making to “make recommendations on locally and nationally accepted best practices.” Fort Wayne, Indiana, has been operating under a neighborhood-friendly policy known as “community-oriented government” since the early 1990s. In Sarasota, Florida, county government and several community foundations formed a nonprofit group to hold regular dialogues on pressing issues.

Some local governments have embedded the language of civic engagement in their departments. In Ventura, California, what used to be called the Communications and Marketing department is now the Civic Engagement Division. In Palo Alto, California, the city council voted to make “civic engagement” one of its top four priorities in 2008, on a list that included such nuts-and-bolts objectives as economic development and building a new library and community center. Terry Amsler is the director of the Collaborative Governance Initiative at the Institute for Local Government there; he sees “an explosion of experimentation in civic engagement” in the Golden State.

In his 2006 book *The Next Form of Democracy,* Matt Leighninger described what he viewed as “the most dramatic change” in local government since the Progressive Era. “It is a prospect that is both thrilling and terrifying,” he writes. “It is likely to be a painful transition, as citizens and public servants negotiate new rules for their relationship. But it also represents the opportunity of a lifetime as we shape and are shaped by these changes, to establish forms of governance that are efficient and egalitarian, deliberative and decisive. It is a chance to renovate and revitalize the level of government that most directly affects the lives of ordinary people” (p. 223).

A Brief History of Local Governance

Local governments, however, have not always been so accommodating. During the late 1800s, municipalities were considered the weak link in the

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American political system. Governing boards were large and unwieldy. Administrative functions were opaquely divided between various commissions and standalone elected offices. State legislatures interfered freely in local affairs. Ward-based political bosses doled out patronage jobs to the party faithful. Progressive Era municipal reformers pushed for home-rule charters to give local leaders the power to reorganize city government and make decisions about fiscal and administrative matters. The next phase was to create municipal research bureaus and come up with new models of governance that were more accountable and less corrupt.

Progressive Era municipal reforms made local governments more transparent, efficient, and professional. In rationalizing and professionalizing city departments, however, reformers failed to replace the ward-based patronage regimes with an effective alternative strategy for mobilizing public participation. By the 1960s, in some communities grassroots organizers and civil rights activists began to see the municipal reform model of a small council, appointed manager, and at-large nonpartisan elections as an obstacle to change. City councils were often viewed as captives of the downtown business establishment. A new generation of activists and thinkers began to question local and federal urban renewal policies, which often seemed to ignore the needs of older inner-city neighborhoods and low-income residents.

Maximum Feasible Participation

The experience in city after city engendered skepticism about the schemes of experts, planners, and power brokers. When the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 was adopted, it began to reflect some of the new thinking about community development, stating that local Community Action Program (CAP) agencies would be "developed, conducted, and administered with the maximum feasible participation of the residents of the areas and members of the groups served."

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In theory, at least, these CAP boards represented devolution of power and money away from municipal bureaucracies and toward a new group of political players—neighborhood leaders, civil rights leaders, and reform-minded civic activists—though in practice the CAP boards weren't always well represented by the urban poor. Nevertheless, established leaders of local government often bridled. In his book *The Great Society's Poor Law,* Sar Levitan quotes Chicago's legendary Mayor Richard Daley: "We think very strongly that any program of this kind, in order to succeed, must be administered by the duly elected officials of the areas with the cooperation of the private agencies" (1969, p. 111).

The idea of participation did not end with the decline of Great Society urban policy programs. In the coming years, the federal government would create hundreds of new citizen participation structures. Also, many individual cities created citizen boards to determine how to disperse the community development block grants that were being made available. CAP and Model City structures helped develop a new generation of community leaders who were committed to the idea of grassroots local decision making and neighborhood empowerment.

The spirit of participation and empowerment of the early 1960s lived on in the "relational organizing" efforts of groups such as the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in Chicago and the Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO) in the San Francisco Bay Area. Inspired by the ideas of the community organizer and theorist Saul Alinksy, these groups employed a style of organizing that was both

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confrontational and creative, rallying citizens around neighborhoods and parishes to make demands on local business leaders and public officials.

Neighborhood Power

By the 1970s, a number of cities had developed neighborhood-based planning and decision-making structures. In *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy,* Jeffrey M. Berry, Kent E. Portney, and Ken Thomson took a long look at five communities (Portland; Birmingham, Alabama; San Antonio; St. Paul; and Dayton) deemed to have successfully implemented structural reforms. What these cities seemed to have in common were:

- Experience with a program such as model cities or the influence of mandates under the federal community block grant program
- Participation based on small, natural neighborhoods, with regular face-to-face discussion of the issues
- Communities not allowing partisan politics to influence the participation system
- Each community reaching a plateau of participation before experiencing financial reversals or political obstacles to the system

Neighborhood entities in the five cities had "proven themselves to be responsible, thoughtful, organizations," concluded the authors. Rather than damaging or hampering the functionality of local government, as skeptics warned, they "enhanced the livability of their communities" (1993, p. 298).

Empowered Participation

Another wave of structural changes to local government came in the 1990s. Chicago's Alternative Policing Strategy (CAPS) brought neighborhood groups directly into the process of determining priorities and planning by the local police department. The city was divided into 280 neighborhood beats with one patrol car assigned to each. Interested residents of the area would attend monthly community beat meetings at which citizens and police would deliberate on the problems and prioritize and develop strategies to address those problems. Police officers and citizens shared implementation of those strategies; at the next meeting, they would assess how those strategies were working. In *Empowered Participation,* Harvard public policy professor Archon Fung noted that crime statistics improved significantly after implementation of the citizen-based strategy.

Between 1995 and 2000, the number of murders in Chicago decreased by 23 percent and other violent crimes dropped by 29 percent. Of course, crime statistics also went down in other cities during that period, partly because of demographics, and they went down even more dramatically in New York, where a sophisticated computerized tracking system known as CompStat was implemented. Nevertheless, Fung's findings suggested that "troubled public agencies such as urban police departments and school systems can become more responsive, fair, innovative and effective by incorporating empowered participation and deliberation into their governance structures" (2006, p. 4).

Neighbors Building Neighborhoods

In 1994, Mayor William Johnson and the city council of Rochester, New York, embraced a governing and planning strategy called Neighbors Building Neighborhoods (NBN). The city's thirty-seven neighborhoods were organized into ten planning "sectors." Each sector formed a stakeholders' committee of business groups and local nonprofit organizations. More than two thousand people participated in the eighteen-month visioning process. Each sector had a facilitator and a city staff person assigned to it to help in the process. The city published a *Citizens Guide to Community Based Planning* and established an NBN Institute to help train neighborhood volunteers. The various sectors developed action plans focusing on such issues as land use, housing, and public safety, to name a few.

The Rochester planning process won a number of national awards, but after the sessions ended the NBN process continued to operate. The sectors maintained their involvement in citywide planning efforts, helping to set priorities for capital improvements, budgets, and how to distribute funds from community development block grants. An NBN priority council was created to serve as a liaison between city government departments and the sectors. Finally, the city created Neighborhood Empowerment Teams (NETs) based in six neighborhood offices, consisting of a police officer and a city staff person to coordinate between the NBN groups and the city administration.

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"Some of the neighborhoods have done very well, and some of them have continued to deteriorate," notes former city council president Lois Geiss. "But even in some of the deteriorating neighborhoods I think they felt better connected to the city because the city was interested in what they thought their neighborhoods should look like. There was a commitment to making the neighborhoods better. It might be as simple as organizing flower pots along an arterial street."

Matching Funds in Seattle

Seattle, Washington, has one of the most ambitious and well-studied regimens of neighborhood-based planning and administration, beginning in the late 1980s with establishment of the Department of Neighborhoods (DON). The city created a system of "thirteen little city halls" as a neighborhood connection to local government. Court magistrates, police, and a range of city services were accessible through these thirteen offices, along with neighborhood planning staff and a coordinator to serve as a link between the community and government.

City government also created a Neighborhood Matching Fund to support community self-help projects. Under the innovative program, neighborhood groups could apply for an equal match of any contributions they could raise themselves, whether cash, in-kind services, donated materials, or volunteer labor. According to city officials, the matching fund program:

- Dramatically increased the number of citizens active in their communities
- Developed better relationships between citizens and city staff
- Brought more resources to underserved neighborhoods
- Helped neighborhood organizations move from being reactive to taking more responsibility

"After years of open conflict over land use issues," writes Carmen Sirianni in the *Journal of the American Planning Association,* "the neighborhood planning process managed to produce a substantial amount of collaboration between the city and neighborhoods, resulting in technically feasible and well-integrated plans that, in the large majority of cases, were responsive to diverse interests around land use and other issues and could point to recognizable measures of broad consensus and fair process" (2007, p. 374).

Thirteen district councils with representatives from neighborhood groups and other community organizations were assigned coordinators who were responsible to city government and the neighborhood groups. A "neighborhood planning toolbox" was developed to help citizens understand the basics of city planning. Neighborhood groups were given

an interesting choice: they could participate in developing a local plan, or agree to the existing comprehensive plan. Each neighborhood was eligible for a $10,000 grant to develop an inclusive process to come up with a vision for the community. Extensive outreach was conducted in order to represent the full diversity of the community and prevent white homeowners, who tend to be the most active group in neighborhood associations, from dominating the process.

City officials estimated that between twenty thousand and thirty thousand citizens were involved at some level in the planning process, in a population area of about 563,000. The inclusive nature of the process ensured the success of bond issues adopted by the voters to help implement the various areas' plans: $200 million for libraries in 1998, and $470 million the next years for community centers, open space, parks, and other citizen recommendations.

Getting It Right

As Putnam, Fung, and other authors have demonstrated, neighborhood-based planning and decision-making structures can change the qualitative and quantitative connection between citizens and government, but reforms must be carefully considered and effectively structured. Some observers view the experience with neighborhood councils in Los Angeles as a cautionary tale. To head off an incipient secessionist movement in the San Fernando Valley, Los Angeles city government launched a neighborhood council system to monitor delivery of city services and make budget recommendations. Within four years, ninety neighborhood councils were established within the city.

Some of the councils have worked well, but overall the experiment has not been viewed as an unqualified success. Controversy and disorder have characterized some council meetings. But Terry Cooper, a professor at the USC School of Policy, Planning, and Development, says the verdict is not yet in. "I keep cautioning patience," he says. "This is an extraordinary experiment and an incredible thing to undertake. The neighborhood councils are not, across the board, as representative of diversity as they should be, but that's always a problem. The quality of the partnerships has improved. People feel they have a friend in City Hall that they didn't have before." The problem, he says, has been the lack of capacity (in terms of time and staff support) among neighborhood groups.

America*Speaks* president Carolyn Lukensmeyer served as interim executive director of Mayor Anthony Williams's civic engagement initiatives in Washington, D.C., during the late 1990s. Asked what needs to be in place to make neighborhood councils work, she mentions three issues: (1) there must be a commitment from both elected officials and city departments; (2) you have to have interagency mechanisms to ensure that neighborhood priorities actually become part of the budgeting process; and (3) citywide summits are necessary, so that every neighborhood entity is thinking about the good of the whole. "What's inspiring about our work," she says, "is that if you invite people so they are all in the same room, the vast majority of citizens want to be inclusive."

Beyond the Neighborhood

Is the neighborhood always the best unit for citizen engagement? Neighborhood groups can become turf-oriented and exclusive. "There are some examples of very vibrant neighborhood associations," says Judith Mowry, who serves as effective-engagement solutions coordinator for the City of Portland's Office of Neighborhood Involvement. But some of the neighborhood groups are not always representative of the city's growing diversity. Portland recently conducted an audit of its civic engagement practices called Community Connect. (See "From Neighborhood Association System to Participatory Democracy: Broadening and Deepening Public Involvement in Portland, Oregon," by de Morris and Leistner, in this issue of *NCR*.)

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One of the recommendations was to look beyond the neighborhood as an organizing principle for participation. "The conversation evolved into the fact that the neighborhood system itself may not have the capacity to meet our civic engagement needs, and we're looking at new ways of bringing in underrepresented groups," says Mowry.

Another potential vulnerability of permanent neighborhood structure is the issue of sustainability. To effectively decentralize power in large cities, governments have to put money on the table and allow neighborhood groups to decide how best to use it. But many cities are in a state of semipermanent fiscal crisis and face tough choices about where and how to cut budgets. With pressing issues such as gang violence and failing schools, the current mayor of Rochester is considering cutting back on the city's impressive Neighbors Building Neighborhoods program, and former council president Lois Geiss worries that some neighborhood groups will be unable to benefit from the program in the future. "I hope it doesn't lead to a bunker mentality where we just hunker down rather than get excited," she says. "It doesn't take a lot of money to excite a neighborhood when they have some planning money to get together and figure out what they might like to see happening in the neighborhood."

Cities with strong-mayor forms of government are particularly susceptible to priority changes when a new administration comes in. Seattle's neighborhood planning program is a case in point. The current mayor doesn't have the same interest in neighborhood-based structures as Norm Rice or Paul Schell did. "With a change of administration, and budget issues, the softer stuff is often the first to get cut," notes Carmen Sirianni. Making the programs work can be dependent on availability of resources and political will, a tough sell in the current environment of financial crisis and uncertainty about the future.

As advocates of democratic governance point out, however, with crises come opportunities. What better time is there to tap the public wisdom and achieve the support of an engaged citizenry than during a period when tough decisions about priorities have to be made? More and more city officials have learned the value of citizen engagement and collaborative problem solving. As John Nalbandian, chairman of the Department of Public Administration at the University of Kansas, notes, more and more public officials are getting the message on the importance of finding better and deeper ways to engage citizens: "So, now it's more a question of, What are some of the alternatives?"

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