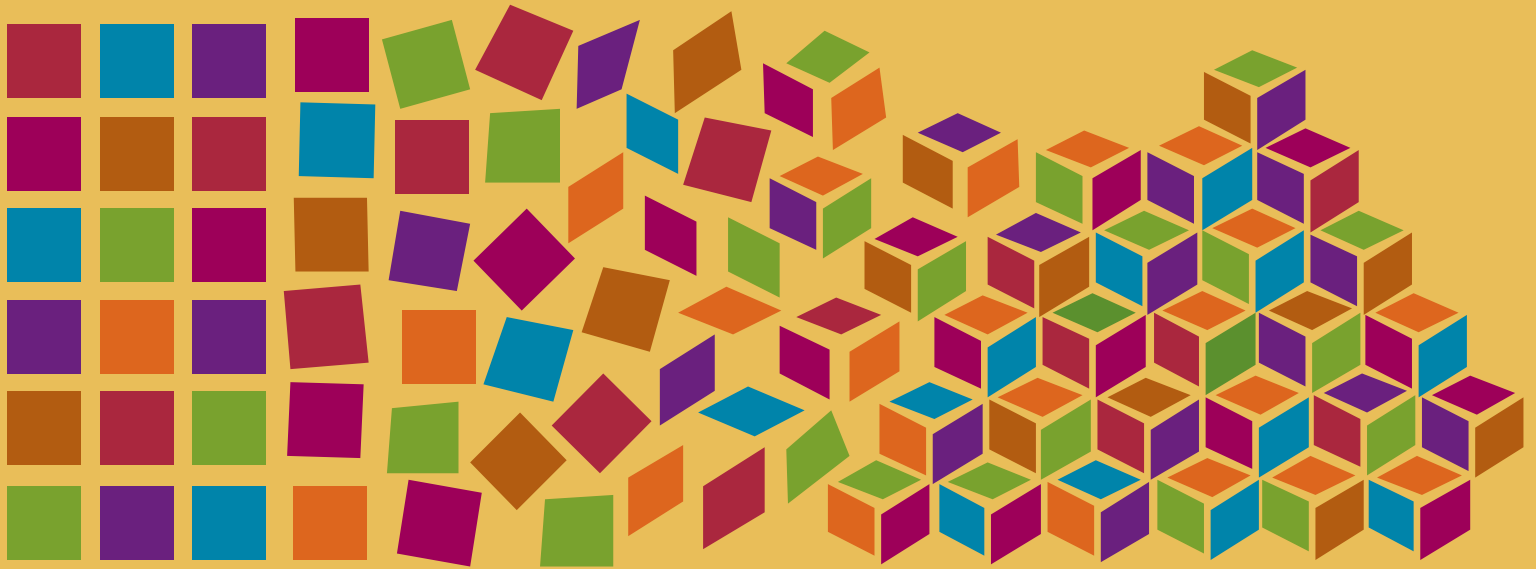# Civic Engagement

A Guide for Communities

The Arlington Forum

Civic Engagement

A Guide for Communities

2006

The Arlington Forum

A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

Table of Contents

F O R E W O R D

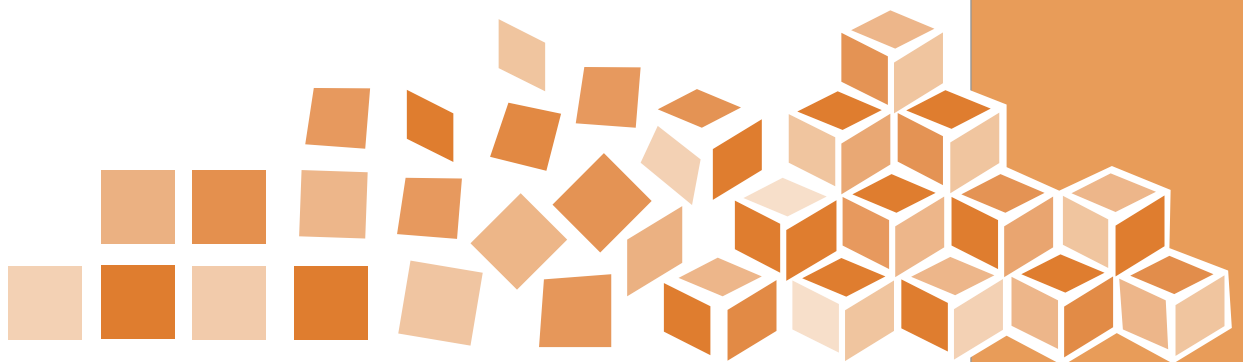This booklet—Civic Engagement: A Guide for Communities—grows out of our experiences over a number of years in our own community of Arlington, Virginia, but the perspectives, principles, and approaches it contains also reflect many, many conversations with other citizens here in Arlington and elsewhere.

Our topic here is civic engagement; our goal is to share what we have learned. While civic engagement is often seen as primarily the responsibility of government and public officials, we came to this as ordinary citizens who felt that the way people in our community were dealing with each other on community issues wasn't working as well as it could. We became "civic organizers"—community members seeking to build the kind of relationships between fellow citizens that respect everyone's contribution and that value the good of the whole community.

Of necessity, our work has involved thinking about and exploring the relationship between citizens who occupy positions of authority and others. Mary Hynes, a local school board member, has offered insights and suggestions that have sharpened our understanding of the why and how of developing a mutual commitment to civic engagement.

The story about civic engagement that is contained in these pages reflects our experience and conviction that civic engagement is a community process that can be initiated by elected officials, public employees, business people, residents, or other community members. The communities in which civic engagement takes place, moreover, may be loose regional networks or formal institutional entities as well as local jurisdictions.

And so we offer here not a "cookbook" formula but a set of questions and touchstones—civic conversation, "inreach," and civic governance—to help citizens, in whatever roles and communities they find themselves, grapple with the need for civic engagement. Working through these questions and referring back to the touchstones is, we have found, the essence of vital and vibrant civic engagement.

Palma J. Strand
Melinda D. Patrician

The Arlington Forum

Citizens and Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is a way of working rather than a separate sphere or a prescribed set of actions, processes, and decisions.

In this guide, we address *citizens* and *civic engagement* in the very broadest sense. *Citizens* are all those who contribute to the well-being of a community, not just people with legal U.S. citizenship and other residents. *Citizen* thus includes business owners and employees, government staff, and other community participants—as well as residents.

Similarly, we describe civic engagement at its most inclusive. *Civic engagement* occurs when *citizens* (as defined above) work together as partners, collaboratively and with mutual respect, acknowledging that their own best interests are irrevocably tied to the good of the entire community. And so *civic engagement* encompasses exchanges between government bodies and the broader community as well as citizens working together in and among PTAs, neighborhood associations, commercial and industrial workplaces, faith communities, athletic leagues, social clubs, artistic cooperatives, and public institutions.

In this view, *civic engagement* can happen whenever *citizens* interact, and it can be initiated by anyone, anywhere—in various institutions or in any sector of a community. Moreover, *civic engagement* operates within as well as between sectors and institutions.

Civic engagement is everyone's prerogative and everyone's responsibility: It is a **way** of working rather than a separate sphere or a prescribed set of actions, processes, and decisions. It calls on *citizens* to act themselves rather than looking to others: not only elected and appointed officials but also public employees, business people, service and interest group leaders, neighbors, and just plain folks. It is many individual actions together that make up *civic engagement*.
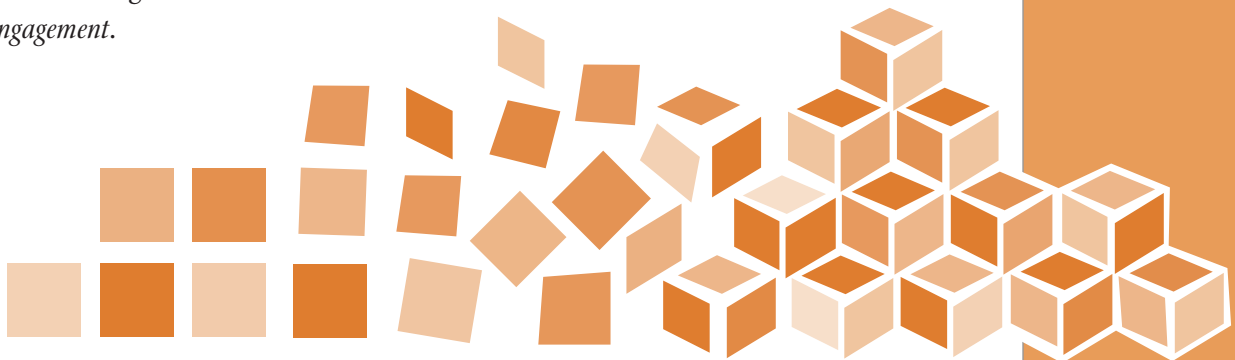
Why Civic Engagement?

Civic engagement can lead to a richer set of ideas, broader buy-in, more resources, and better solutions.

Every community—whether a neighborhood, a town or city, a regional network, or a discrete institution—is a web of relationships. Relationships connect individual residents and citizens, private institutions, civic and service organizations, faith communities, schools and local government, to name a few. Everything that goes on in a community affects and is affected by these connections.

Leaders or organizations that want to address a problem, manage change, build community, or explore a new topic will be more successful when they build on, plan for, and develop community ties as a necessary part of whatever process they decide to use. Civic engagement can immediately lead to richer sets of ideas, broader buy-in, more resources, and better solutions.

Even more importantly, leaders and organizations need to recognize that the relationships created by the process persist when the process ends. These associations then become part of the community web—for good or ill! Paying attention to civic engagement increases a community's likelihood of building a stronger relationship web.

Whether you are a policy maker, a leadership trainer, a citizen activist, or the chair of an organization, civic engagement that actively cultivates opportunities for citizens to work together as partners, collaboratively and with mutual respect, is an important key to solving problems. To begin, think about how to tap into and build on what already exists in your community; think about how to incorporate relationship-building into the daily work that you and/or your organization do. Our experience has shown that leaders who pay attention to existing connections and carefully plan to build more as a part of every process are more likely to live in communities that have the capacity to do great things.

NETTIE WASHINGTON
CITY OF TULARE, CALIFORNIA

Nettie Washington served three 4-year terms as the first African-American elected to serve on Tulare's City Council. The City of Tulare is located in California's agricultural Central Valley and has a population that is approximately 6 percent African-American. Washington observes that, since 2000, the number of local elected officials of color at annual nationwide meetings has jumped dramatically.

Washington now serves as chair of Tulare's newly-formed Community Relations Commission. Responding to recent racial incidents, the Commission has taken on the task of serving as a body of citizens that intentionally creates bonds between disparate groups—of actively promoting "respect among Tulare citizens."

Washington's experiences have led her to the conviction that to make institutions work, "you have to pay attention to what relationships need to be built and what lines need to be crossed."

*The importance of developing constructive, collaborative working relationships—**particularly relationships that cross racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and other social lines of fracture**—extends equally to elected bodies, governmental departments, and other community organizations.*

Making the Commitment

Successful civic engagement connects citizens, community institutions and local government in a strong, complex web committed to improving the whole community.

Civic engagement—purposefully building relationships to address community needs—is like consistently deciding to take the stairs instead of riding the elevator. While occasionally inconvenient, you do it because you know it's good for you! And you do it because you know that, if you steadily work at increasing your stamina and strength, you will be better equipped for a crisis.

We believe that communities that regularly practice civic engagement are like the regular stair walker. They have stamina and strength when the going gets tough. Folks in these communities know each other because they have worked on issues and had constructive exchanges periodically—not only when there is a flare-up.

Unfortunately, too many communities only take the stairs when the power is out. They practice building stamina, but it's episodic rather than systematic. They convene groups when there is pressure to find a solution to something that may be reaching crisis proportions. More often than not, the process creates winners and losers, harming rather than creating relationships across groups.

You can avoid this scenario by regularly strengthening your community's relationship web. As with any web, the more strands—the more connections—the more strength and flexibility. And as with any web, you build and enhance the base at the same time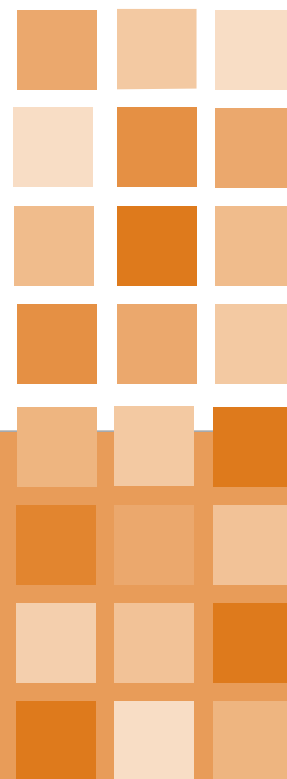 that you are increasing the number of strands. Successful civic engagement connects citizens, community institutions and local government in a strong, complex web committed to improving the whole community. Done systematically, the result is broadened, vital connections throughout your community and far less need for crisis management.

Civic Engagement Touchstones

Civic engagement at its best nurtures civic conversation, pays attention to inreach, and leads toward civic governance.

When citizens talk about what works in terms of civic engagement, they focus less on formal structures and processes and more on actual experiences—how individuals work together and treat each other, regardless of the setting.

This means that successful civic engagement is **not** like carefully following a recipe. In fact, a formulaic process can ring hollow to those who participate, making people feel as though they were just "window dressing."

What transforms "going through the motions" into the kind of civic engagement that builds relationships and strengthens communities is careful and sustained attention to three touchstones: ***civic conversation, "inreach," and civic governance***.

Civic Conversation—*broad-based discussions among diverse groups and institutions* that reach the core of community values, direction, and well-being.

Inreach—*organizations reaching inside to build and strengthen civic relationships among those who are working within and with those organizations.*

Civic Governance—*initiative and responsibility* for community problems, actions, and solutions *shared by a wide range of citizens.*

Civic engagement at its best nurtures civic conversation, pays attention to inreach, and leads toward civic governance.

JANETTE HARTZ-KARP
STATE OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Working closely with Western Australia's Minister for Planning and Infrastructure, consultant Janette Hartz-Karp has convened numerous processes designed to find common ground on issues ranging from the location of freight routes to creating the world's most livable city. Her work rests squarely on two transformative principles:

- the citizens involved are held accountable for developing a long-term solution as well as defining the problem; and

- the minister has determined that she will move forward on the decisions made through these processes.

Meaningful civic engagement, says Hartz-Karp, requires "a paradigm shift—a fundamental change in the way policy makers and policy experts interact with citizens and moving on from community consultation that involves education and input to engagement that involves shared decision-making. And making that change will involve continually innovating to find ways to optimize participation to ensure that it is inclusive and representative; deliberation to ensure it is honest, open, and seriously considers different viewpoints and values; and opportunities to influence policy development and decision-making."

There is no one model for civic governance. The precise contours in any given process of how responsibility and initiative are shared will emerge from the specific issue and the relationships between decision-makers and other citizens. What remains constant is the commitment to partnership based on trust.

Renegotiating the relationship between official decision-makers and other citizens requires a commitment not only on the part of a public official but a corresponding shift by citizens at large, the media, and other public officials. With civic governance, the buck stops on many desks rather than on just one.

Civic Conversation

Civic engagement involves strong relationships among citizens. But in many communities, citizens find themselves divided along various fault lines: race, ethnicity, economic status, education, geography, gender, occupation, religious or other beliefs. Institutional roles can contribute to such divisions: tenants versus homeowners, homeowners versus business, business versus public employees, public employees versus elected officials, elected officials versus taxpayers. The list goes on.

People gravitate toward others who are similar, and so conversations about community issues and direction often take place primarily in homogeneous settings. The civic conversation touchstone highlights the importance of *broad-based discussions* and connections *among diverse groups and organizations*. Only through civic conversations that bridge across differences can citizens articulate core community values, develop a shared story about the community, and envision the "good of the whole."

Having conversations with others who are different can be challenging; citizens often have little practice talking across various cultural lines. And so a primary purpose of civic conversations—of dialogues and deliberative processes—is to provide forums and opportunities to do so. Civic conversation provides a space in which the kind of relationships that are essential for civic engagement can grow.

> *The questions you pursue in a community conversation or dialogue are not answered once—they must be revisited as new people enter the conversation and change occurs in the community. The value of such processes is not only in the outcome on a specific issue but in the relationships that are built.*
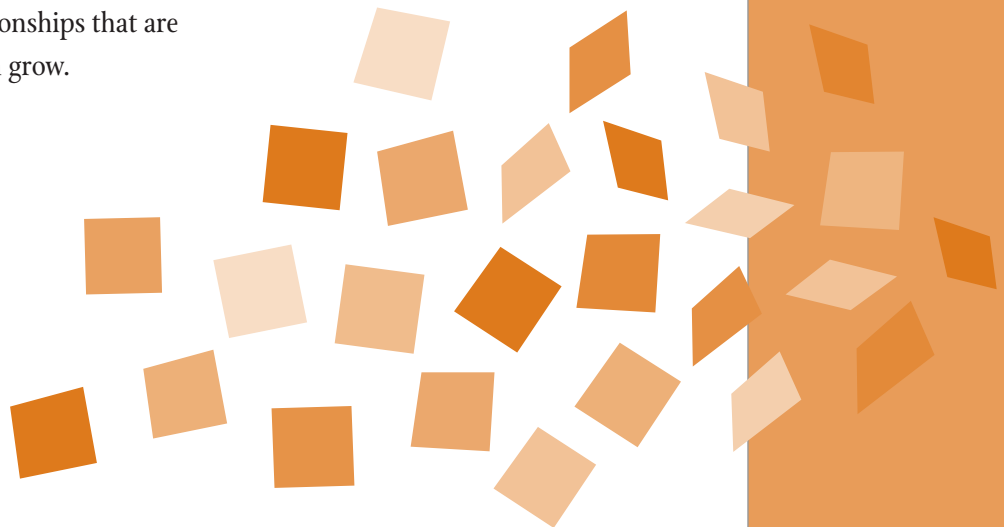
Civic Engagement Touchstones

Inreach

Most citizens enter public or civic life by being asked to help solve a problem in their neighborhood, by volunteering to coach a youth sports team, by pitching in as a lunch buddy and tutor via their workplace, or by organizing a plant sale or silent auction to benefit their child's school. Neighborhood associations, sports leagues, faith communities, service groups, PTAs, and businesses—along with governmental entities—lie at the heart of a community's civic life.

Inreach grows from a recognition that how government and other institutions themselves operate is a critical aspect of civic engagement. Inreach happens when these *organizations reach inside to build and strengthen civic relationships among those who are working within and with those organizations*. Through training, internal commitments, and allocation of resources, inreach enables the people connected with an organization to see each other as partners and to take ownership in the organization's goals and actions. Inreach also leads organizations away from fear and "power plays" and toward creativity, respect, and collaboration.

Inreach and Outreach

Inreach may lead to outreach if an organization realizes that some people it is committed to representing do not have an adequate voice. Outreach without inreach may mean that the organizational support necessary to sustain a broader base is not yet present. The bottom line—"getting the word in" and "getting the word out" go hand in hand.

Some examples:

- Inreach is youth basketball leagues training coaches in good sportsmanship— toward their players, toward other teams, toward referees, and toward the custodians of the gym.

- Inreach is local government providing training to enable its planning staff to synthesize their traditional roles as "experts" with new roles as facilitators and partners in addressing community issues.

- Inreach is business owners nurturing initiative and respect among its employees—both internally and in interactions with customers and other community members.

- Inreach is the PTA of a racially, ethnically, and/or socioeconomically diverse school undertaking a series of internal conversations designed to support parents in communicating across cultures.

Effective inreach identifies and builds on an organization's existing strengths and relationships. The civic capacity that results supports civic engagement that reaches outside the organization as well.

Civic Governance

Civic engagement embodies the conviction that the more citizens contribute, the better off communities are because the universe of what is possible expands. In particular, decisions that have been built through deliberation with the wider community give government greater legitimacy to act. This shift leads away from a conception of power as being tightly held by public officials and toward a conception of power involving *shared initiative and responsibility*.

This shift doesn't happen overnight, and it isn't easy. Officials may feel that they are abdicating their responsibilities or that other citizens cannot be trusted to arrive at wise conclusions. Community groups may require time to build trust in government's willingness to share power and to be willing to assume a new level of responsibility. All citizens are likely to tread carefully in working with others who come from different backgrounds and who have unfamiliar perspectives.

Civic conversation and inreach lead to strong civic relationships within public institutions, between people in public and other institutions, and among citizens generally. These relationships support communities in shifting toward civic governance. They give public officials the confidence that it is wise to rely on a broad base of citizens. They assure community groups that new responsibility will be shouldered by many rather than by only a few. And they reassure citizens of the value of venturing beyond accustomed boundaries.

When citizens in all walks of life begin to see each other as partners working to benefit their community overall, civic governance becomes possible. At all stages of governance—from setting the agenda through defining problems and developing solutions to implementation—civic governance calls for citizens to work together as partners. With civic governance, official decision-makers and other citizens first envision and then make real new ways of sharing power and shouldering responsibility.

TOM ARGUST
CITY OF ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

In the early 1990's, newly-appointed Commissioner of Community Development Tom Argust perceived a high level of cynicism and civic malaise. After looking at community organizing models and with the endorsement of a new mayor, *Neighbors Building Neighborhoods* was born in 1993. *Neighbors Building Neighborhoods* envisioned small-scale civic conversations building to a citywide comprehensive plan.

Argust acknowledged that this process called for a new role for city planning staff. "We had to be at the center of the change," says Argust today. "There could not simply be a change in how the public related to government; there also needed to be a change within. We had to do a lot of work with our own staff, who were planners with master's degrees in architecture and urban planning. The major change for them was that they had to think of their jobs differently, not as a leader but as a facilitator and enabler of citizens doing that work."

Twelve years after its inauguration, *Neighbors Building Neighborhoods* is reviewing its overall effectiveness and evaluating its ability to keep bringing new people in. Argust sees a certain lack of energy in the process today and wonders if over time, even with a focus on continuing renewal, the initiative has grown a little stale.

Inreach by the city with its planning staff was a key component of the Neighbors Building Neighborhoods initiative.

Successful civic engagement isn't a one-time event; it calls for renewed efforts and new approaches as time passes.

Practicing Civic Engagement

Start close to home, focus on building a solid core, and then expand to more widespread community initiatives.

Gathering Your Community's Story

Most public officials and citizens agree that a vibrant civic life is good, but often it isn't until a specific issue or event highlights the value of civic engagement that a community really rolls up its sleeves. Yet whether the impetus is an imminent crisis or a diffuse malaise, the underlying story of the community determines the immediate and longer-term needs to which civic engagement must respond. Consequently, understanding where your community is now in terms of civic life and how it got there is essential.

To begin, ***map your community***. To really get a clear idea of the current state of civic engagement, who would you need to talk to? Narrow this list to a reasonable number, paying attention to the broadest range of viewpoints. Make sure you include people who are not currently involved. It is not essential to have the same depth of conversation with everyone who might care about the issue.

Then ***start talking to the people you have identified—one-on-one***. Gathering the facts of the story is a lot like talking over the back fence—people often share details in private conversations that they will not share initially in public forums. Start with questions such as these:

How did we get here?
Was there a triggering event that led us to this juncture? Whatever the impetus, gather information for and from current and future participants so that they are, to the extent possible, "on the same page." Remember, conflicting information isn't a problem; it's different threads of the overall story. You will uncover multiple versions as people begin to talk.

What has changed?
Has the community changed in a significant way? Are community demographics different now than they were a decade ago? Have decisions regarding development or schools or spending created intended or unintended consequences that have not been addressed by the community at large? Has a major business moved into or out of the area? How have people experienced the change?

Whose story is it?
Chances are that there are community members or segments of the community who have not been part of the public dialogue. What is the history of relationship between various groups or individuals? Are there one or more groups that have been isolated or polarized? Are there groups that are historically at odds? A representative range of stories needs to be told.
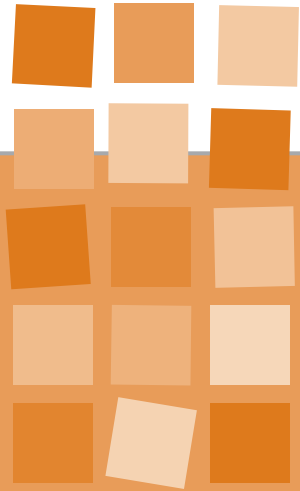
Listen well and take good notes. This is a conversation so you must be part of it, but you must also accurately record what you hear. You can check people's perceptions in subsequent conversations and unearth reasons for conflict as well as common ground.

Take care in these conversations. For some, the story might be painful. People will also see things differently, and it is important to gather those viewpoints in a non-judgmental way. This is not about your preconceived ideas of how the community works. We can't emphasize enough the need to hear people's stories with an ear to what is new and unique when the whole quilt is sewn together.

Start building the "story of your community." From the one-on-one conversations, a story about your community will begin to emerge. Make sure that it reflects the full range of individual stories you have heard; check back with people to share and confirm. This story will serve as the basis for moving forward—in coming through a crisis or in beginning to change day-to-day habits. The details will shape the agenda of public conversations, and allies will emerge from the people you've talked to when they see themselves reflected in the agenda.

THE ARLINGTON FORUM
ARLINGTON COUNTY, VIRGINIA

In 2002, Arlington County, Virginia, was experiencing increasingly vocal community criticisms that major demographic shifts in this inner suburb were not reflected in the county's public life and decision-making. In response, the County Board, County Manager Ron Carlee, and Assistant County Manager Raul Torres initiated a self-assessment of civic engagement. In conducting the assessment, The Arlington Forum spoke to a broad range of citizens about their experiences and perceptions vis-a-vis civic engagement—paying particular attention to groups that were seen as "underengaged" and including county staff in the mix.

Since its completion, this broad-based survey has served as the grounding for concrete civic engagement initiatives. One of the most intractable issues identified by the report concerned decisions about real estate development. The county responded by requesting that the Arlington Forum explore how developers, staff, and diverse groups of residents might be engaged in training that would enhance collaboration and the growth of civic relationships in the context of these decisions. Through one-on-one meetings and focus conversations, the full range of participants began to articulate the importance of respectful working partnerships to the constructive functioning of the process.

Another issue identified was the fact that because of their "unwieldy length" and "unpredictable nature of scheduling," County Board meetings were not as citizen-friendly as they could be. Again working with the Arlington Forum, Board Chair Jay Fisette convened a working group made up of active residents, business, and county staff and conducted focus conversations in which residents, staff, developers, and activists talked about how the board meetings functioned. In these proceedings, staff expressed frustration that the meetings often took up whole Saturdays unnecessarily, taking away time staff could otherwise spend with their families. This concern was addressed by a structural change in the handling of the Board's consent agenda. An effort was also made to address residents' concerns about the unpredictability of agenda items, also viewed as burdensome in the context of people's lives.

Staff was included throughout as a "citizen group" whose concerns needed to be heard—not just as experts in service to the "real citizens."

Focus conversations discover people's perceptions and experiences around a particular issue to enable change that grows out of their concerns and needs. Focus conversations differ from focus groups in having this open-ended quality rather than being designed simply to gauge people's reactions to predetermined choices.

Practicing Civic Engagement

Range of Community Needs Calling for Enhanced Civic Engagement

Your community's story will serve as the basis for moving forward—in coming through a crisis or in beginning to change day-to-day habits.

Community crisis involving violence or physical harm
- Use of deadly force or "hot pursuit" by police
- Youth suicide, homicide, or recklessness

Emotionally-charged community conflict
- Changing school attendance policies
- Redevelopment affecting existing residential areas
- Domestic partner benefits
- Community historically polarized by race, geography, other factors

Controversial community decision
- Siting of a new school, park, building, or program
- Adoption of a new or revised budget
- Management of scarce environmental or other resources
- Rezoning
- Creation of a new magnet school or alternative school program

Community goal-setting
- Strategic Planning
- Comprehensive Plan
- Community Indicators or Visioning

Day-to-day
- Perceived community malaise
- Changes in the community from external or internal causes

Taking the Pulse of Your Community

As you gather the community story and prepare to move forward, assess where your community is currently in terms of civic life and what its potential is for building civic capacity.

Questions such as these will be helpful. Start by scanning the questions and registering your "general impression" responses. Then go through them again, more slowly this time, and list specifics.

Civic Conversation

- Are there community forums on important issues in which a broad range of citizens participate?

- Do all parts of the community feel included and represented?

- Are there strong relationships between people in different sectors, in different racial and ethnic groups, of different faiths and beliefs, in different economic circumstances?

Inreach

- Do people in community institutions such as government, business, and volunteer organizations work together as partners across departments and organizational levels?

- Do community institutions invest time and resources to sustain and build civic relationships?

- Are people throughout community institutions encouraged to take initiative to further institutional goals?

Civic Governance

- Does government provide citizens with opportunities and space to deliberate with diverse others on issues of importance to them?

- Do citizens consistently have a meaningful voice in major community decisions—defining issues, setting agendas, and formulating options—rather than simply reacting to proposals developed by staff or outside experts?

- Are the contributions of all parts of the community acknowledged and valued?

TERESA LEE
BAY AREA AIR QUALITY MANAGEMENT DISTRICT, CALIFORNIA

"We were attempting to break through the noise in people's lives. We had a mandate to improve the air quality of the Bay Area, but we didn't have a mandate (and didn't want one) to change the way people drove their cars, or used lawnmowers or hairspray," says Teresa Lee, Director of Public Information and Outreach.

Lee and her staff, supported by outside consultant Malka Kopell and her team at Community Focus in San Francisco, began in 1990 with a baseline survey that told them that while members of the public didn't know how they could affect the environment for the better, they would want to help if they did know. The District used that motivation to move beyond an advertising campaign. Lee developed grass roots resource teams throughout the affected area, employing professional facilitators to bring people together to figure out how to spread the word, create projects to make a difference, and link to the community.

Fifteen years later, those groups are still the driving force of air quality efforts in the Bay Area. Lee points out, though, that government agencies need to be prepared: "When you start to talk to the public, they start to talk back. We have to make decisions about what we can and can't do from a resource standpoint. But the results speak for themselves. The campaign has been a tremendous positive. People have been willing to incorporate this into their lifestyle—and also at the ballot box."

Civic engagement is not a separate function of a government or community but a way of accomplishing goals—such as changing public behavior to improve the environment.

With civic governance, people "talking back" and differences of opinion become part of an ongoing conversation that strengthens the relationship between government and community members.

Practicing Civic Engagement

Moving Forward

The actions that you can take to move forward respond directly to the questions you asked yourself about civic engagement in your community. As you move from self-assessment to action, remember to start by identifying and building on community strengths. What does this community do well? Are there organizations that are dependable, creative, efficient, or otherwise contribute to the community's quality of life? Is the community particularly supportive of or concerned about a specific set of issues? Why do people want to live here?

The actions suggested here start close to home, focus on building a solid core, and then expand to more widespread community initiatives. Many of these actions are within the sphere of most citizens and do not require a formal position or a significant budget: A wide range of citizens can take on leadership roles.

Start Close to Home

- Create a list of community organizations, including non-traditional groups like tenants associations or church advocacy groups that might not be regular participants in community processes; identify those that are affected or have something to contribute; arrange conversations with them or with key people within them.

- Share copies of this booklet with leaders of community organizations or influential folks in your community; convene a follow-up meeting to discuss the ideas in the guide and how they might apply to the current situation.

- Bring up ideas based on the civic engagement touchstones at regular meetings of groups you already belong to; follow up with others who respond to what you say.

- Arrange meetings with local elected officials to sound them out on their experiences with civic engagement; pay close attention to what they see as their lessons learned.

- Notice stories about community processes in your local newspaper; seek out the reporters who write the stories and initiate civic engagement conversations.

As you take these steps, pay attention to the civic engagement touchstones. Identify all groups and organizations that are affected or will affect the issue. Be sure to include not only traditional citizen groups but also staff, people who are citizens of the community by virtue of employment, and others who are affected or have something to contribute but do not ordinarily have a voice. Remember to engage the media and public officials as fellow citizens, not only as reporters and leaders. Cultivate relationships with non-traditional leaders as well as those in visible leadership positions.

Focus on Building a Solid Core

- Review the websites listed in the back of this guide; identify useful information.

- Identify community members or organizations with expertise in running processes; invite them to provide training for others.

- Pull together organization leaders who have a track record in representing the broad range of their constituencies; arrange a "best practices in representation" sharing session.

- Tap those in your community with experience and expertise in communicating across lines; organize cross-cultural discussions to give people practice.

- As you conduct individual conversations and participate in group meetings, be intentional about developing a common language for the community to use regarding civic engagement.

- Practice keeping your communication loops continuous; make a point of touching base with people you've talked to; staying in touch over time lets people know how their contributions matter and builds relationships.

As you nurture key players and relationships, be aware that civic engagement involves *skills*, which can be supported and developed. Encourage organizations to provide training and support. For those who assume leadership roles, skills in involving their constituencies broadly and effectively are of prime importance. The ability to communicate across lines of difference, for example, is a skill that can be taught, practiced, and honed. Similarly, civic organizing and the facilitation of focus conversations, public dialogues, and other meetings are process skills that can be developed.

**STEVE BURKHOLDER
CITY OF LAKEWOOD, COLORADO**

After participating with the National League of Cities in conversations on the state of representative democracy, Mayor Steve Burkholder came to see a degree of urgency: "We are undergoing a huge paradigm shift in this country. People are angry, and they feel they have no voice." He is especially motivated by issues facing many first-tier suburbs: changing demographics; aging infrastructure; dead or dying shopping areas; and transportation. "We're becoming a two-tiered society, and we have to rethink what we're doing."

In 2004, with guidance from outside consultants John Ott and Matt Leighninger, Lakewood convened a group of approximately 39 people representing a cross-section of the community. This group has grappled with community issues, articulated community priorities, and focused on honoring different points of view, asking at every step of the way, "Who's missing?"

Burkholder has been pleased with the way a community story has begun to coalesce. But all is not picture perfect. Due to newspaper coverage by a large daily (which had not been part of the process from the start) of meetings that were held to reach out more broadly, the community began to polarize on the issue of an impending sales tax referendum. The group, though overwhelmingly in support of the sales tax, nevertheless decided to recess until after the election rather than become embroiled in the debate.

In the context of a long-term visioning process, Lakewood recognized the need for civic conversation to bring together different parts of the community.

Civic engagement processes are not insulated from the media and electoral politics. While local media as well as proponents and opponents of the referendum were at the table, the involvement of a larger news organization somewhat removed from local issues, as well as people with strong views who had not been part of the process, changed the dynamic. It is possible that bringing these players in earlier under the same ground rules could have made a difference.

Practicing Civic Engagement

Expand to More Widespread Community Initiatives

- Identify organizations that already have working partnerships; look for ways to build on what already exists.

- Develop opportunities for disparate leaders to reflect together; build their shared understanding of what the community is saying.

- Plan for discussions within and across groups to make sure that all viewpoints are aired.

- Make plain from the beginning that solutions require all participants to roll up their sleeves; no one group can hold another responsible for creating change.

- Acknowledge that all groups have necessary resources; look for contributions from everyone.

In the longer journey, the goal is to make civic engagement a continuing practice and priority. This will take time; relationships and habits do not grow overnight. Some community groups may be suspicious if they have historically been excluded. Reaching across sectors and other lines and developing new ways of working together may feel awkward at the outset. In addition, institutions may move slowly, needing time to train people, to shift perspectives, and to re-align resources.

**LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS
STATE OF CONNECTICUT, KEVIN GRUNWALD
TOWN OF MANSFIELD, CONNECTICUT**

In partnership with the Connecticut-based Graustein Foundation, the state League of Women Voters has for a number of years administered a grant program—Community Conversations About Education—designed to initiate and support dialogue about current issues in Connecticut school districts. This program grew out of a survey conducted for Graustein in 1993 that showed "a big gulf in Connecticut between educators and the general public." To begin to bridge that gulf, the League of Women Voters awards modest funds and provides support to communities in the state that seek to hold conversations on topics of local interest.

Kevin Grunwald, Director of Social Services in the Town of Mansfield, was the lead in a dialogue during 2003-2004 that responded to the local school system's identification of full-day kindergarten as an issue. The organizing group decided to start with the issue of early care in education rather than push the school system's agenda on the community. Notwithstanding this, the issue very quickly came back to full-day kindergarten, which was ultimately approved in the following year's budget.
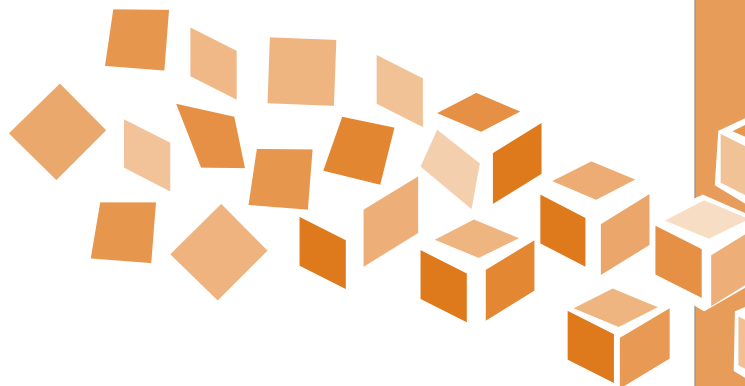
According to Grunwald, however, the most important outcome was the relationships that developed from the process. "The importance of relationship is critical," he says. "People said explicitly that they wanted to be heard. It was not about being part of the process so much as an opportunity for them to come and state their feelings about something."

Civic engagement can be initiated by any one of a number of citizens or institutions, including those whose focus is on a relatively large community such as a region or state, within which smaller communities are nested.

Defining an issue more broadly at the outset or staying open as to result can often elicit more viewpoints, more thoughtful insights, and more creative solutions. If a position is already staked out when a matter is first presented to the public, the result is often polarization and debate rather than discussion, group problem-solving, and relationship-building.

Using Outside Resources Wisely

A controversial or complicated decision or a large-scale public process requiring a skilled facilitator, an emotionally charged conflict in need of a third-party mediator, or a specialized task such as a cultural competence audit may call for bringing in help from outside the community. An outside resource can bring in valuable specialized knowledge, a wealth of experience in navigating unfamiliar or difficult terrain, and an ability to work effectively with all sides.

But a community with a focus on civic engagement will not just hand the whole problem over to an outsider. Such a community will choose an outside practitioner who sees the value of strengthening the community and then work closely with him or her.

Supporting the work of an outside practitioner is important. The work of people inside the community is essential to:

- Ensure that necessary resources are made available.

- Identify people with influence and authority in the community (with or without official titles or positions).

- Reach out to those with whom they have personal relationships.

- Conduct the informal, private, one-on-one conversations that lay the groundwork for the success of more formal and public processes.

Regardless of whether a civic engagement process is led by an outsider or a member of the community, a civic-savvy community will view that process as an opportunity to build civic capacity and to strengthen the community's foundation for moving forward. The community may invite those who are at odds on an issue to be the nucleus of an ongoing dialogue. It may engage them in identifying and designing future training. Or it may develop processes that will enable the community to handle future issues itself.

Moreover, hiring outside experts can be costly, so it is important both to have laid the appropriate groundwork so that their work can be as effective as possible and to develop the internal resources necessary to build on that work when it is completed.

Even those of us who try to "live healthy" may need to see the doctor sometimes! But, as with one's doctor, taking on the responsibility of working with an expert is likely to yield the best long-term results.
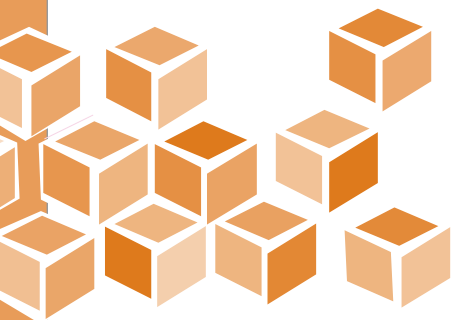
Toward Civic Health

**Civic capacity leads to community resilience—
in good times and in facing challenges.**

Whether you have trained for and finished a triathlon, started walking every day, or tried to eat more of the foods that are good for you—there comes a point at which new efforts either give way to old patterns or become part of the way you live everyday. The civic engagement approaches we have described are no different.

As with getting more exercise or eating healthier, the key to civic health long-term is to view civic engagement not as an extra activity but as part of your community's "lifestyle." The benefits from doing so are stronger relationships between different groups of citizens, community organizations that are civic through and through, and a climate in which the contributions of all citizens are welcomed. This civic capacity leads to community resilience—in good times and in facing challenges.

It's worth remembering, particularly if you have been on the triathlon path, that taking care of yourself doesn't have to be a full-time occupation. Similarly, if your community has been through an intense conflict or wrenching decision-making process, staying the course with civic engagement doesn't mean staying at that pitch long-term. Gentler measures will often do the trick if they are practiced consistently.

The civic engagement approaches that we have described in this guide have the primary goal of improving the community's capacity to deal with the inevitable day-in and day-out decisions to be made, issues to be addressed, and conflicts to be resolved. But they also result in richer relationships for us as citizens, more satisfying participation in the organizations we belong to, and a rewarding sense of contributing to the creation of something beyond ourselves. This has been our experience; we believe it will be yours as well.

RESOURCES

The handbooks and websites listed below are entry points for people in communities who are seeking to identify outside resources or merely to learn more.

Mediation/Conflict Resolution
- www.mediate.com, "The World's Dispute Resolution Channel"
- www.crinfo.com, "The Conflict Resolution Information Source"

Consensus Building
- www.beyondintractability.org/m/consensus_building.jsp, website of "Beyond Intractability: A Free Knowledge Base on More Constructive Approaches to Destructive Conflict"

Deliberation and Dialogue
- www.thataway.org, website of the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation

Cross-Cultural Communication
- www.nmci.org, website of the National Multicultural Institute

Civic Organizing
- www.activecitizen.org, website of the Minnesota Active Citizenship Initiative

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mary H. Hynes, an advisor to the Arlington Forum, contributes her perspective as a teacher and 11-year veteran Arlington School Board member to this work. mary.hynes@verizon.net

Melinda D. Patrician, co-founder and lead organizer for the Arlington Forum, brings 30 years of experience in public relations for public interest organizations as well as community activism in Minnesota and Virginia. md.patrician@arlingtonforum.org

Palma J. Strand, co-founder and lead organizer for the Arlington Forum, combines legal training and teaching with practical experience as an engaged citizen in her own community of Arlington, VA. palma.strand@arlingtonforum.org