

Where Residents, Politics and Government Meet

Philadelphia's Experiments with Civic Engagement

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Philadelphia City Hall (Beth Legg)

Americans by large margins say that government does not work for them. Studies show that the views of average people are not well represented and people don't believe they are heard by those in power. This crisis of representation often leads to a crisis in participation.

Solutions to the low levels of engagement and lack of faith in democracy, its institutions, and its representatives tend not to be sustainable, scalable, or transferable.

Proposed solutions often favor technocratic expertise over experience. Apps and new data sets become the way to just fix problems in the short term; metrics and measurable wins take precedence over collaborative policy making and genuine constituent empowerment that would lead to sustainable improvements in the quality of life for all.

Fresh thinking about civic engagement does not have to be complex. **The best approaches go back to the basics, ask the right questions, and focus on the people.**

Philadelphia is the fifth-largest city in the United States and one

long strained by racial and class tensions. There, new thinking about civic engagement, trust, and participation has taken the form of a massive investment of philanthropic and public resources into neglected public spaces and civic infrastructure, like parks, rec centers, and libraries. Can these investments, if designed to engage residents in local decisions, help rebuild the bonds of community and democratic trust? This is a question relevant to cities and towns all across the country. Philadelphia's experience may provide some answers.

Governments, along with the philanthropic, private, and nonprofit sectors, have begun to support such work. Foundations are increasingly aware that urban economic growth has generated great wealth while widening inequality. Funders are responding by supporting policies and engagement models that try to ensure that residents can benefit more equitably from economic development. In addition, the private sector has begun to think about distressed cities and localities as opportunities for development. And government officials have welcomed the capital and the expertise that oftentimes understaffed and cash-strapped agencies lack.

In Philadelphia, democratic need, funder support, fresh thinking, and municipal and resident commitment to change come together.

At the invitation of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, we explored two of its investments. The nonprofit Fairmount Park Conservancy is leading a civic engagement effort in advance of Rebuild, an initiative led by Mayor Jim Kenney that will invest hundreds of millions of dollars to improve neighborhood parks, libraries, and recreation centers. The second one is the PHL Participatory Design Lab, a 2017 “Knight Cities Challenge” winner, which uses behavioral economics and human-centered design to improve public services provided by the Office of Homelessness Services and Department of Revenue.

Our goal was to develop some insight into what kinds of interventions are likely to have the most impact in promoting sustainable civic engagement and more inclusive, equitable, and responsive public policy. We tested assumptions in these two models of individual engagement, and we looked at how these models can apply in other cities.

Our research took us to one of the first disc golf courses in the

world, to city hall, and to neighborhoods across Philadelphia.

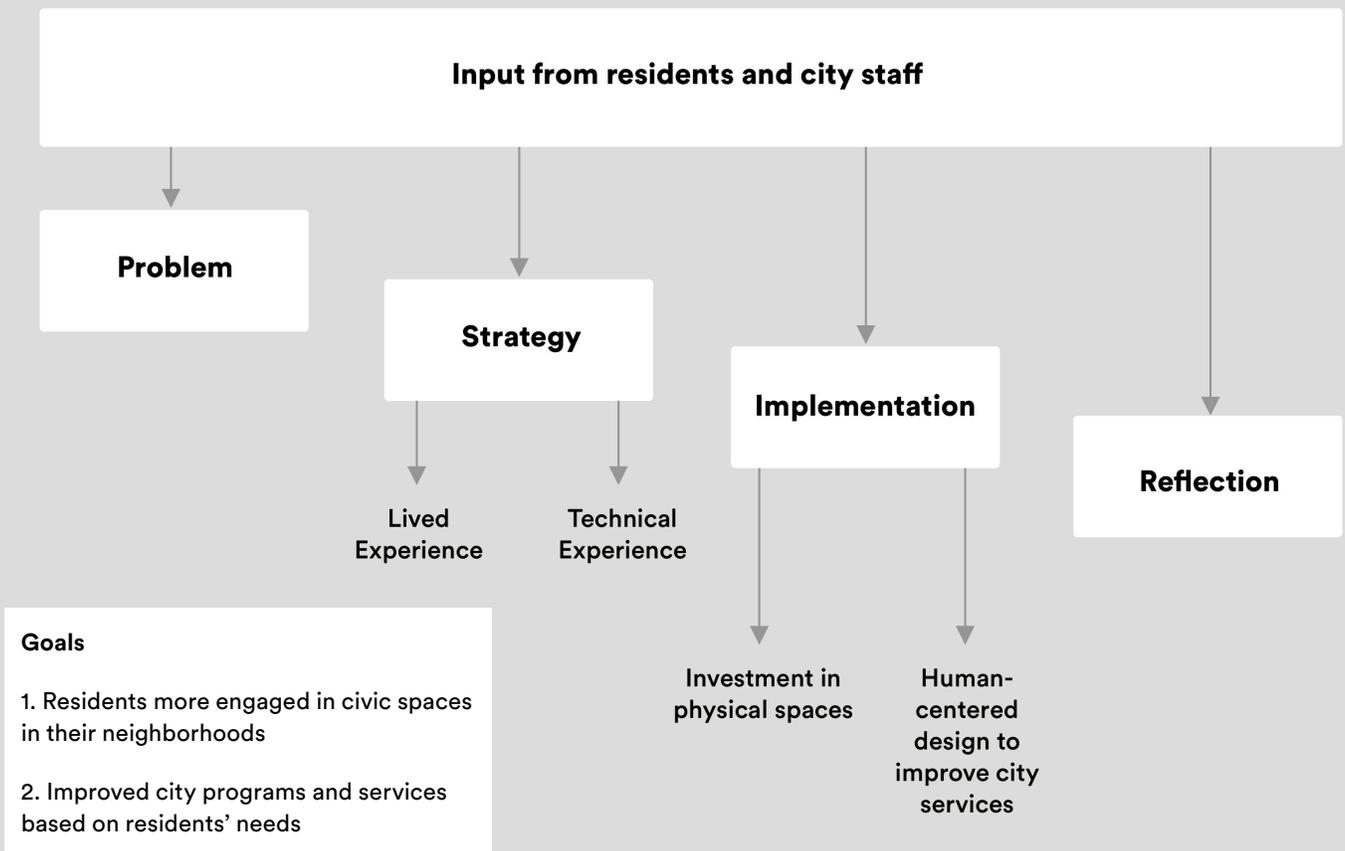
Much of the work that we examine in this paper reflects 21st century realities and challenges that must be grappled with by those in charge of policy making, those who advocate for such interventions, and the people for whom policies are crafted.

Case Studies: The Value of Working Together

Innovative city government and civic engagement must include a municipal framework of multi-party, vertical, and horizontal partnerships that empower different stakeholders, residents, and experts. Philadelphia showcases the variety of ways in which city employees, policy experts, nonprofits, and researchers can work together to address local problems. These examples speak to the different ways that cities and residents can rethink both their partnership and empowerment potential and the outcomes that they can produce as a result.

Instead of residents having incentives only to participate in response to a problem they’re experiencing, local governments and engagement structures can promote proactive and positive engagement. This first requires city officials to recognize residents

This is our theory of change: The goals of any practitioner—city official, activist, or organizer—are to simultaneously engage more residents in civic spaces in their neighborhoods and also improve city programs and services based on residents’ needs.



as experts on their own neighborhoods, and it also means that residents need access to trainings on organizing, community engagement, financial compliance, leadership and conflict resolution, and the municipal structure.

The first case study explored the relationship between physical spaces and civic life. Rebuild's experience with the Philadelphia Parks & Recreation system (in partnership with the Fairmount Park Conservancy), brings together city staff, nonprofits, and multiple levels of resident involvement to maintain sites across the city. The second case study looked at how Philadelphia has incorporated human-centered approaches in its policy design and outreach models to improve interactions between residents and the city, through the work of PHL Participatory Design Lab.

Findings

We found that **addressing low levels of civic engagement often means recognizing citizens as advocates for their neighborhoods. Similarly, hearing the public's expertise requires investing in civic structures, listening to new voices, and taking chances on new ideas.** By combining experience with technical knowledge and building with citizens rather than for them, solutions that focus on social capital investments go beyond the voting booth and may be sustainable, scalable, and transferable.

This "expertise meets experience" model can be applied and replicated in communities across the country:

1. There is no "one-size-fits-all" model for civic engagement. Different models will work better and be more inclusive depending on who participates, how they engage, and what types of opportunities are available, as we saw with Philadelphia's range of programming.
2. Process and implementation can slow down progress. City officials and policy makers can easily miscalculate how long it will take to pass a bill like the soda tax, or get funding for a program like Rebuild. These delays may discourage under-resourced residents from participating, while well-resourced residents familiar with the political process can wait it out.
3. Civic organizations, such as the Philadelphia nonprofit Fairmount Park Conservancy, can complement municipal government and help offset its limitations.
4. Though technology and digital tools provide more civic engagement opportunities, technology alone does not effectively eliminate barriers to entry or help attract more diverse viewpoints. When integrated as part of a policy process, as with the PHL Design Lab, technology has a lot of power.
5. Ideal resident input systems communicate to users what

happened as a result of their contributions. Positive feedback loops help residents experience success either individually on a campaign or as a sense of shared effort with others, which can help build their sense of agency. One example may be the volunteer groups in Philadelphia: advisory councils at recreation centers and the friends groups at parks.

6. Local governments and engagement structures should encourage proactive and positive engagement, rather than incentivizing residents to merely participate in response to a problem. For example, the Philadelphia Parks Alliance does grassroots-style outreach around rec centers' neighborhoods to match renovations with the communities' specific needs.
7. Improving civic engagement must include reforms that make democracy more equitable. While programs such as Rebuild, the PHL Design Lab, and volunteer groups have an impact, it's important to think about what other structural factors may impact traditional democratic processes.

Recommendations

Regardless of the many challenges yet to come, the civic engagement models we studied in **Philadelphia could change the way advocates and policy makers think about what civic and community engagement looks like.** The recommendations below are both short- and long-term ideas based on what we learned about Philadelphia's civic engagement ecosystem, philanthropic funding, and the likely future of these "expertise meets experience" initiatives.

Long-Term

1. As the soda tax case teaches, it's helpful if funders can adopt an if-then model to plan for unforeseen events, delayed political timelines, or limited funding streams to keep projects and grantees moving.
2. Plan for "sailboats, not trains" by thinking about civic engagement funding as a long-term, adaptive investment without rigid planning or short horizons. Such a framework would help projects adapt to obstacles like the Rebuild project has faced.
3. Design sustainable funding streams by encouraging public spending and public/private partnerships where philanthropic money acts as a "down payment" on expected public investment. To do so, funders can support increased municipal capacity by backing fellowships or helping departments find innovative, yet self-sustaining, funding sources.
4. As powerful as programs like Rebuild can be, the political arena also deserves attention. Promote structural reform and discussions about the role of money in politics, voting reforms

(like ranked choice voting), and the resources that government needs in order to do its job.

Medium- to Short-Term

1. Build a civic layer to create a spectrum of engagement for individuals that meets them where they are in the evolution of their “civic life,” providing different levels of engagement and accessible opportunities. As Philadelphia departments and non-profits implement different outreach methods, other organizations can experiment with tactics ranging from block-walking outreach to roles that work directly with the City.
2. Invest in training for government employees and civil society leaders, similar to City volunteer trainings, as well as more diverse employment outreach.
3. Avoid one-off, occasional engagement by developing an ongoing and iterative system for residents through outreach, input, and participation. Philadelphia friends groups and resident advisory councils are an instructive model.
4. Bring engagement into the 21st century by taking advantage of modern technology and asking whether these tools are engaging all residents. For example, volunteer groups talked about both the benefits and limitations of social media.

The Common Thread: Where Lived and Technical Experiences Meet

Americans’ declining institutional trust can be seized as an opportunity for change. Policy makers, advocates, and residents themselves can rethink the ways democratic institutions respond to communities’ needs.

Models that make government more effective, responsive, and inclusive—such as investments in physical spaces to foster social capital growth and human-centered design to improve services—can successfully combine engagement ideals with 21st century realities.

Rebuild offers a particularly illustrative case of what such models can look like, with multiple lessons. First, at a time where municipalities see rising deficits, it suggests a way that localities can make the most of foundation investments and find new ways to complement revenue. Second, Rebuild is an exciting, ambitiously large-scale program that shows how giving residents responsibility can work—if they are given the necessary resources and if projects reflect their needs. Third, large projects have many interlocking components and take time to execute. In a project as ambitious as Rebuild (incorporating economic revitalization, workforce training and diversification, and infrastructure repairs), funders, government officials, advocates, and residents must work together to address these complicated dynamics.

The PHL Design Lab is an example of what deploying cutting edge tools can look like, including evidenced-based decision-making and human-centered design. The Lab’s efforts to empower residents and public officials in the policy process shows that government does not have to be an inherently rigid institution. The Lab’s work has led to more effective policy, like making sure residents enroll in property tax payment assistance programs to keep their homes, or making the intake process more humane for those experiencing homelessness.

Measuring the success of changes to the policy process is difficult; quantifying the impact that participating in community engagement programs like Rebuild and the Design Lab may have on citizens themselves is nearly impossible. But that does not make it any less worthwhile. As Harvard political science professor Jane Mansbridge explained, “participation does make better citizens.... The kinds of subtle changes in character cannot easily be measured with the blunt instruments of social science. Those who have actively participated in democratic governance, however, often feel that the experience has changed them.”²

In an environment characterized by instant news, social media, and on-demand living, the slow changes which come about from civic engagement can be difficult to believe in or measure. Not every effort to promote civic engagement will be a large, news-grabbing project such as the ones in Philadelphia, but the behind-the-scenes, day-to-day work of making governance equitable and inclusive can make communities more resilient and responsive.

Notes

1. As one example, Bloomberg Philanthropies has provided critical resources designed to spur innovation teams in cities across the globe.
2. **Jane Mansbridge**, “Does Participation Make Better Citizens?” *The Good Society* 5.2 (Spring 1995) 4-7.

About

New America’s Political Reform program addresses the dysfunction of American democracy and declining trust in government. We think this work requires new ideas; fresh perspectives; experimentation; an innovative public sphere; and an aspirational, yet realistic, vision of American democracy. Through imaginative research, readable and relevant analysis, broad media outreach, and convenings, we aim to create new alignments and challenge stale thinking. Our goal is to expand the scope of policy options and facilitate progress on the compelling cause of renewing American democracy.

The Political Reform program’s Participatory Democracy Project looks at forms of engagement that make public policies and process more inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the communities they serve. We study and highlight engagement models that seek to redistribute political power and empower civic voice, giving communities a say in the decisions that shape their social, economic, and political realities.