Democratic Governance and Civic Health in Newark, Delaware
A Case Study

BY EZRA J. TEMKO

On February 25, 2008, city council chambers in Newark, Delaware, overflowed with angry citizens hoping to stop a large housing development project on a country club site, as well as prevent an associated road outlet for the new development that would flow traffic into an adjacent neighborhood by demolishing a house there. The mayor closed public comment before everyone was given an opportunity to speak. Council unanimously approved the project, because the comprehensive plan and zoning laws allowed the project and the council did not have a legal alternative.

Less than two weeks earlier, the City of Newark's Planning Commission had begun the process of updating Newark's comprehensive land use development plan. A comprehensive development plan looks at land use development over the long run. The document is legally binding and is used to guide decisions, lay out a pathway for implementation, and give developers and others a sense of what locality to look for, as well as constituting a marketing device. In contrast to the public hearing for the country club development project, only three members of the public came to this meeting.

Council and community members were displeased, to put it mildly, with the outcome of the country club development project. Would things have been different if there had been a community forum with the developer prior to the formal development process? Would outcomes have changed if the city had collaborated with the country club, which had dwindling membership and outdated facilities, and offered a purchase of development rights (PDR) package? One active Newarker writes, "Newark's comprehensive plan is not really 'comprehensive' and does not include the community's vision in its development." What might Newark look like if, when Newark first developed its comprehensive plan, there was a participatory process that involved visioning and a wide cross section of stakeholders? Most important, what can Newark and other contemporary local governments do to ensure they are equipped and ready to address the opportunities and challenges facing our communities?

This article argues that local governments should use democratic governance to enhance a community's problem-solving capacity and civic health. It will explore the case of Newark, Delaware; evaluate the status of Newark's civic health; and reflect on how democratic governance can be used to enhance the community's civic health.

Contemporary Society

Contemporary society presents challenges of increasing magnitude to local governments, who face increasingly limited resources. In its *Civic Index*, the National Civic League (NCL) lists some of the underlying conditions confronting communities including frustrated and angry citizens, presumption of bad intent, negative media, and dysfunctional politics (1999, pp. 7–8). Citizens look askance at government-as-usual operations yet often feel helpless to make a difference or are unaware of the issues at hand. The relationship between many governments and their citizens can be characterized as an adult-child relationship, instead of an adult-adult relationship in which citizens have avenues to deliberate and address the critical issues facing our society.

Our society has been transformed by globalization, extreme changes that closely integrate the world economic, political, and cultural systems at a remarkably fast pace. Marked especially by interconnectivity and interdependence, globalization has led to citizens having instant access to information and greater ability to interconnect and mobilize around issues. The role of the marketplace has grown. Today's young people came of age when commerce, not government, dominated much of culture. The millennials, those born in the United States between 1977 and 1995, are more ethnically diverse than ever before; one in five have parents who are

Published online in Wiley Online Library (wileyonlinelibrary.com)

immigrants and one in ten have a parent who is a noncitizen. Millennials have a higher level of tolerance toward others of different identities than previous generations had. Americans as a whole are pursuing meaning and significance in their lives and becoming more community-focused. Inclusion and collaboration are becoming more important in our society.

> Americans as a whole are pursuing meaning and significance in their lives and becoming more community-focused.

According to a National League of Cities (NLC) presentation by Jason Siegel on democratic governance, the twenty-first century is marked by "controversial, increasingly 'no win' issues like land use, taxes and finance, underperforming schools, race and ethnic relations, and the role of police in the community . . . there are never enough resources to fix every problem, so conflicts over who gets what are inevitable. Public resources aren't sufficient for solving public problems" (2006, p. 8). Contemporary society has problematized a community's ability to address challenges because of the increasing complexity of policy issues and the need for a breadth of stakeholders and actors to address interdependent challenges.

Democratic Governance Causes Civic Health

To face these challenges, communities need a healthy civic infrastructure, social capital, political engagement, and formal and informal processes and networks of decision making. Healthy communities are measured by the community's quality of civic infrastructure—its civic health. There are numerous approaches to measuring civic health. Traditional approaches, such as that of the federally chartered National Conference on Citizenship (NCOC), focus on citizens and their engagement. Globalization has led to privatization and new partnerships; this in turn means a more contemporary view of civic health that transcends citizen engagement and looks at additional sectors and stakeholders. The NCL subscribes to this expanded view and breaks civic health into four broad areas: community vision, community governance (by business, citizens, government, and nonprofits), working together (bridging diversity, crossing jurisdictional lines, reaching consensus, sharing information), and solving problems (building community leadership, educating citizens to meet community challenges, learning from our experiences).

A government's job is to address a community's challenges and opportunities to the best of its ability. To do this, a government must ensure its community has a high degree of civic health. Robert Putnam wrote in *Making Democracy Work* that "social context and history profoundly condition the effectiveness of institutions" (1992, p. 182). Governments must be cognizant of the broader societal context in which they operate and adapt to their environment to succeed. Historically, government has evolved to match its changing context, starting with civic democracy at the time of the founding fathers and changing to a corporate model of citizenship during the growth of corporations, urbanization, and a need for expertise. After World War II, sprawl and suburbia created new demands for services and growing "nimbyism" (not in my back yard) on the part of the public. The spirit of the 1960s expressed itself with citizen activism, often focused outside the governmental system, as marked by the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. The federal government's role in local affairs grew. The 1970s and 1980s saw a shift toward participatory government as people joined neighborhood associations; organized tax revolts such as California's Proposition 13, which placed a cap on property tax; or otherwise organized to demand services and involvement and decrease the agency of decision-making discretion and the sphere within which governments could operate.

The characteristics of contemporary society have altered how local governments must operate today. Interdependence has eroded the possibility for clear and direct solutions. Local governments face unprecedented, complex community challenges they cannot solve alone. Local governments need a twenty-first-century engine to create and enhance their civic health in order to have optimal processes and outcomes. This engine is democratic governance, defined by Matt Leighninger in *The Next Form of Democracy* as "the art of governing a community in participatory, inclusive, deliberative, and collaborative ways" (2006, p. 3).

Democratic governance has emerged as a modern technique for governments to address opportunities and challenges facing their communities. Democratic governance attempts to describe the projects and structures that have emerged from democratic efforts and the new relationship forming between citizens and government.

Democratic governance often involves government acting as a convener and collaborating with citizens and stakeholders inside and outside of government. It can involve temporary organizing efforts, often described as citizen involvement, public engagement projects, and democratic organizing. Democratic governance can also involve permanent decision-making systems. This can manifest itself in the modifying of Robert's Rules of Order, of which the original intention was to restrain the individual, with facilitated dialogue using models from feminism or the consensus processes. This can also manifest itself in structural changes such as replacing the traditional public hearing with collaborative public forums and small-group discussions, or forming permanent decision-making systems such as neighborhood-level structures.

Democratic governance has the capacity to create opportunities in this period of economic integration and chaotic change. In the twenty-first century, democratic governance is not only how governments and other institutions ought to act; it is also how they *must* act in order to address the opportunities and challenges facing our communities. One key difference between "government" and "governance" is that the latter includes shared decision making with citizens and organizations that are without formal power. Democratic governance involves being inclusive and collaborative, which in turn helps strengthen the parts of a community not directly controlled by government but that have significant influence over outcomes in the community. Democratic governance is the twenty-first-century engine for communities to enhance their civic health.

The NLC has embraced the concept of democratic governance as a best practice to address community issues comprehensively through collaborative, deliberative, and participatory methods. However, those embarking on this path should be forewarned. Democratic governance is not an easy fix to problems. It requires significant investment, support, and staffing. Civic health does not solve problems; it increases the community's *capacity* to solve problems. Democratic governance, like civic engagement, is not easy. It is messy and takes time, but the results are long-term. To address complex issues, communities must collaborate and work inclusively to accomplish their goals.

Delaware Examples

There are many modern manifestations in the evolving toolbox of public deliberation. Although communities may initially think about democratic governance as a tool for *other* communities, there are many examples of democratic governance in action—including here in Delaware, where experiments in democratic governance have been occurring since the early 1990s.

Race Relations

Addressing race relations, the YWCA acted as a convener to address the civic health component of bridging diversity. With a variety of partners, the YWCA took up the democratic governance tool of public deliberation. Using study circles, the partnership convened citizens to dialogue about race in facilitated forums and created action committees to take steps against racism, resulting in the largest workplace application of study circles in the nation.

Land Use Development

Addressing land use, the City of New Castle acted as a convener to address the civic health component of having a shared inclusive vision by using the democratic governance tools of network-based recruitment, community meetings geared toward conversation and dialogue, and a leadership team with broad representation. With a breadth of stakeholders as partners, New Castle updated its comprehensive plan and developed a five-year action plan.

Delaware Cancer Consortium

Addressing a high cancer incidence and mortality rate, the State of Delaware acted as a convener to address the civic health components of learning from the past and collaborating across sectors by using the democratic governance tool of having an ongoing advisory group and involving stakeholders in a constructive collaborative system. With diverse

partners, Delaware developed a deliberative and participatory task force that developed a clear and useable cancer control plan, resulting in improvement for cancer mortality that leads the country.

Coastal Zone Act

Addressing the lack of formal regulations around Delaware's Coastal Zone Act, the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control (DNREC) for the State of Delaware addressed the civic health components of reaching consensus, collaborative governance, and government being accountable and responsible. By using the democratic governance tools of conflict assessment and consensus-based negotiation, DNREC created the conditions for a consensus-oriented process and, using consensus-based negotiation, created regulations that were supported by all stakeholders and adopted by the legislature and successfully implemented.

Curbing Binge Drinking

Addressing curbing binge drinking, the University of Delaware (UD) and the City of Newark acted as a convener to address the civic health component of collaborative work; the university and city worked together to address common problems by using the democratic governance tool of collaborative effort—forming a coalition group to cooperate on the issue with a different operation and business model than what the university and city used. With partners and stakeholders, UD and the City of Newark formed the Building Responsibility Campus-Community Coalition, which has reported changing attitudes, policies, enforcement, and improvements to the judicial system and spending on alcohol-free student activities.

Case Study: Newark, Delaware

As a Newark City Council member, I am keenly interested in and concerned with the state of the city's civic health. What follows is an application of the concepts outlined above for Newark, Delaware. It takes a snapshot of civic health in Newark and offers pragmatic steps forward that can be taken (and are) to enhance Newark's civic health.

Newark is a college town in northern Delaware. Like other communities, it is facing many modern challenges. Examples are the closing of the Chrysler auto manufacturing plant, our underfunded retiree care and pension funds, and figuring out how to meet energy conservation goals, renewable energy requirements, and financial revenue requirements within our electric utility. Newark's local government is interdependent; many state roads and traffic signals are controlled by the state, the university is exempt from the city's zoning laws, property owners are the ones who ultimately decide which businesses go into downtown, a school district controls the public schools, and so forth. Surveyed residents expressed feelings similar to the underlying conditions NCL reports communities are experiencing. A business leader wrote that Newark has "too many factions." A city staff member wrote, "I see Newark as very parochial. . . . They can't seem to coordinate with the university, let alone the county." Another survey taker commented there are "lots of 'done deals' before the community can participate." A city elected official commented that the "university can still be secretive." A survey taker noted, "Often times it is very disappointing to see how very few Newark citizens show up at a Newark Planning Commission meeting, or even take an interest in an agenda item at a city council meeting (people do come out if something is happening next door to them)." The contemporary problems discussed earlier in this article are the same challenges Newark is facing.

Civic Health Survey

To evaluate the civic health of Newark, I administered a civic health survey to a cross section of stakeholders. The survey was formulated on the NCL's Civic Index publication and tailored to reflect civic infrastructure needs in Newark. This publication included several civic health components: community vision, roles for citizens, roles for government, roles for business, roles for nonprofits, bridging diversity, reaching consensus, sharing information, crossing jurisdictional lines, educating citizens, building leadership, and ongoing learning. Survey takers were asked to rate how Newark was doing on each component, on the basis of three to five specific indicator statements and then broadly for the component as a whole. There were sixty-nine total statements, and space for comments.

The civic health index was tailored to Newark, in particular through addition of two components: roles for the University of Delaware and bridging university-community relations. For roles for the

university, four specific indicator statements were used: the University of Delaware views the Newark community as an asset rather than an obstacle, there are open lines of communication between the University of Delaware and the Newark community, the University of Delaware creates knowledge-based partnerships and synergistic sharing of intellectual capital with the Newark community, and the University of Delaware participates in broad community improvement efforts and encourages service learning and volunteerism in the Newark community.

For bridging university-community relations, four specific indicator statements were used: the University of Delaware and the Newark community have a shared vision for the future of Newark, community members outside the university view Newark's student population as part of the Newark community, students are involved in community decision making, and the University of Delaware and Newark work cooperatively to address common problems.

Seventy-four stakeholders were identified according to the areas covered by the civic health survey. This included randomly selected citizens, active citizens, city staff, city elected officials, business leaders, university administrators, student leaders, nonprofit leaders, and leaders of multicultural organizations. Seventy-seven percent of the surveys were returned.

All sectors must be civically oriented and fulfill their contemporary roles for our communities to thrive.

Civic Strengths and Questions

Newark's strongest broad component area is community governance. According to the NCL, "successful communities," those that can comprehensively address the opportunities and challenges that confront them, "blur the boundaries between the government, business, and nonprofit sectors" (1999, p. 13). Institutions across sectors are democratizing and becoming participatory. Old management and structural styles focused on hierarchy are being replaced with team-oriented approaches. U.S. corporations are changing their management practices and encouraging employee involvement. All sectors must be civically oriented and fulfill their contemporary roles for our communities to thrive.

There were three specific indicators of civic health in which there was near-consensus that Newark is doing well. The first is that the Downtown Newark Partnership is active and visible in the Newark community. The Downtown Newark Partnership (DNP) is a private-public partnership dedicated to the economic enhancement of downtown Newark. It is a collaborative effort, meaning groups partner together and change how they do business in order to work together for a shared vision. The City of Newark convenes the partnership, which has broad representation from community stakeholders. The second civic strength is that the Newark government is responsible and accountable. The city places customer service at the center of its mission and philosophy. Being part of a local government with a district system helps council members stay connected to their constituents. The final civic strength is that businesses participate in broad community improvement efforts. Businesses are not the same as citizens, but they are perceived as members of society. Therefore businesses are expected to fulfill their part of a social contract and play certain institutional roles. Corporate citizenship is important to community vitality.

Survey results within the civic health area of working together raised questions regarding three civic health components. The first is university-community relations. Surveyed student leaders and active citizens feel this area needs improvement. Most elected officials do not agree that the university and community have a shared vision for the future of Newark. University administrators all disagreed that community members outside the university view Newark's student population as part of the Newark community.

The second civic health component warranting further discussion and attention is interjurisdictional cooperation. Surveyed active citizens do not believe that the Newark government works well with neighboring communities to develop regionwide policies. Random citizens and business leaders believe Newark does well in this area, though university administrators, student leaders, and active citizens do not. More than one-fourth of survey takers answered "I do not know" to the overall health of this component as well as to the specific indicator statements within this component. It may be a normal

finding that people are not aware of the extent to which communities reach across jurisdictional lines. Therefore further information is necessary to determine the health of this component.

The final area that deserves further dialogue is bridging diversity. Surveyed multicultural leaders, active citizens, and university administrators all felt this area needs improvement. Many do not believe the leadership of the community reflects the diversity of the community. University administrators felt the city needs improvement in communicating across ethnic and cultural lines. The administrators and active citizens believe Newark can do better in involving cultural and ethnic groups in decision making. City elected officials agree that the Newark community views diversity as an asset rather than a problem. In reference to the specific indicator statement "The Newark community responds harshly through policy and action to discrimination, racism, or racist acts," all city elected officials agreed with this statement, but all multicultural leaders either disagreed or marked "I do not know," pointing to a disconnect.

Newark's Growing Edges

Newark's "growing edges" are those civic health areas in which the city is underperforming and needs improvement. These civic health areas can be enhanced through applying specific democratic governance tools. One of Newark's growing edges is building leadership. Only 20 percent of survey takers agree Newark is doing well as relates to building leadership. No survey taker strongly agreed that Newark is doing very well on this component or any of the individual indicator statements. More than half of survey takers either do not know or disagree that Newark has programs to develop and encourage emerging leaders.

There are many democratic governance tools to address this civic health area. One program is the Neighborhood Leadership Institute, which, under the leadership of Los Angeles Council President Eric Garcetti, trains neighborhood leaders in community organizing and government. Another tool is youth councils, which give youths a role in local government and build leadership skills. From the need for building leadership in the community, the City of Newark is instituting a Citizens Academy. Many communities, such as Colorado Springs, Colorado; Sacramento, California; and Orange County, Florida offer citizen academies. The local government offers courses and public sessions on topics such as land use development, public financing, transportation, and parks management. The purpose of these courses is to empower citizens to be able to effectively participate in their local government.

Another growing edge for Newark is bridging nonprofits. The survey asked how Newark is doing as it relates to roles for nonprofits and asked about specific indicators therein. The responses indicate that Newark is potentially doing well in this area. However, the survey results shed light on an area of concern. For the broad component area's health, one-third of respondents answered "I do not know" and more than half answered either "I do not know" or "Neither agree nor disagree." This type of response was paralleled, and for the most part exaggerated, in the specific indicator questions. Survey takers marked "I do not know" as frequently for only one other component area, crossing jurisdictional lines. Survey takers frequently responded that they do not know the role nonprofits are playing in the Newark community.

To address this capacity issue, city government can act as a convener by getting nonprofits to the table and discussing potential collaborations. The city could publish an online directory of nonprofits and work to build on collaborative projects that already exist, or events such as Community Day that already serve as a platform for nonprofits. An example of the nonprofit sector empowering nonprofits and collaborating for resources is the Alliance of Arizona Nonprofits. The alliance held town hall meetings across Arizona with a diverse group of stakeholders. From these discussions, the alliance put together One Voice Arizona, a publication that addresses issues, offers suggestions, and puts forward next steps for consideration. Here in Newark, we are working to fill this need by planning a nonprofit networking forum to help our area nonprofits fulfill their organizational missions. The Newark Nonprofit Network Forum will bring Newark nonprofits together to open up lines of communication about their relationship with local government and opportunities

for collaboration, either between the city and nonprofits or simply between nonprofits.

Communicating Newark's vision is an additional growing edge for Newark. This civic health component is crucial because it is one of the four broad areas of civic health. Only three of seven city elected officials could agree with all three specific indicator statements of community vision and the overall health of community vision. A shared vision is one that all stakeholders and sectors in the community are aware of and working together to implement. Those in government—city staff and city elected officials—may have an implicit sense of where they are trying to go, and therefore be more likely to agree with the statement. Thus it is important to also analyze survey results for this component with city staff and city elected responses isolated from the rest of the dataset. If city elected officials and city staff are excluded from the survey results, the results change significantly. Excluding city staff and electeds, 60 percent of respondents either do not know or disagree that Newark has a long-term plan. Forty-four percent either do not know or disagree that the Newark community has a shared vision that guides our practices and policies. Of those not directly affiliated with the city, only about half agree that Newark knows its unique identity in relationship to other communities and seeks to preserve it, or that Newark is doing very well as it relates to community vision.

If Newark has a sense of its direction (and it is not clear all would agree it does), then it would be helpful to communicate that vision intentionally. A democratic governance tool to address this area is the community visioning process, which became popular in the 1990s. One of the best-known modern community visioning processes took place in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1984. Community visioning is a consensus-oriented process that includes a description of a community's ideal future and concrete action steps and goals to get there. Newark has not yet decided to do community visioning and provide the resources and support needed to have a community visioning process. Newark has, however, taken a related step by deciding to add public performance goals for each department to its budget process going forward.

A final growing edge for Newark is neighborhood involvement. Seventy percent of respondents disagree that most Newarkers participate in neighborhood or civic organizations (excluding "I do not know" responses). Survey takers across stakeholder groups believe most citizens do not participate in neighborhood or civic organizations.

Neighborhood civic associations often fail because of low turnout and high burnout among their organizers. This is in part because many civic association leaders view their role as representing rather than involving fellow residents. Neighborhood associations that are action-oriented, act as neutral conveners, and work for change are often much more successful. Participants need motivation, capacity, and networks of recruitment (they need to be asked). Most important, civic or neighborhood associations need a relevant purpose and mission to fit the needs and desires of their members.

One community that has embraced neighborhood involvement is Southlake, Texas. In 1993, Southlake began a program called SPIN, for the Southlake Program for the Involvement of Neighborhoods. SPIN's purpose is to facilitate communication with citizens; its initial role was to organize community meetings with potential developers prior to the formal development process. SPIN is a council-appointed volunteer organization that plays a vital role in the community, hosting events and forums and facilitating communication. Another democratic governance tool to enhance neighborhood involvement is to establish neighborhood councils. This is when neighborhood associations or councils have a formal relationship with the municipality. They are quasi-governmental layers of problem solving that are citizen- and neighborhood-oriented and help bridge a city government and the community. Newark has not yet taken steps to address this area of concern.

Further work will need to be done to convince those used to traditional government processes to adopt democratic governance techniques, and though Newark has made some specific steps in the form of temporary organizing efforts, there has been resistance to making larger structural changes. Perhaps if the temporary organizing efforts mentioned above are successful, there will be more buy-in, both

DOI: 10.1002/ncr

for additional temporary organizing efforts as well as for structural changes. NCL recommends using civic engagement and democratic governance techniques in a community as part of the process of measuring civic health. This survey was necessarily limited in that respect, though perhaps a confidential survey has the added benefit of soliciting more honest comments than may have been given in a public setting. However, broad community engagement in the survey process would have begun a healthy dialogue about Newark's civic health and could have led to the necessary community buy-in to see more significant changes toward democratic governance.

Survey recipients who did not return surveys should not simply be excluded from the conversation on civic health. Not only do these people need to be recruited to be involved; their inability to complete the survey speaks to the civic health and level of engagement of the Newark community. At the first randomly selected household to which I went, the person who answered the door refused to even look at the survey. She lamented the fact that her house had been selected and suggested the survey be given to her neighbor a few doors down, who was engaged in community activities. She did not have time or interest and refused to consider participating. This points to a disconnect in the community between residents and civil society.

Conclusion

Problem solving in contemporary society presents new challenges for local governments. Too often decisions are made for the community without the inclusion of the community. It is a moral problem, but beyond the associated ethics there is a practical problem of failing to create sustainable change. Decisions made without civic engagement, though sometimes adequate, tend not to be optimal decisions. Sometimes they do not confront root causes. Their implementation suffers without significant buy-in.

Governments can no longer effect change without engaging citizens, nonprofits, and the marketplace. Citizen involvement tends to be low for issues of broad community interest, while involvement is strong but often unproductive for issues of self-interest. Governments are increasingly constrained in their ability to solve problems. To address these concerns, local governments are turning to democratic governance, governing that is participatory, inclusive, deliberative, and collaborative. Democratic governance involves shared leadership, with government often acting as a convener. Using cross-sector participation and including the community in decision making is a means to achieve greater community capacity to solve problems, or greater civic health. Strategically using democratic governance tools and a systematic shift toward a democratic framework of governance would enhance any community's ability to accomplish its goals. Giving priority to civic health and embracing democratic governance can lead to addressing problems comprehensively and to transforming the fabric of our society into livable, sustainable, participatory communities.

References

Leighninger, M. *The Next Form of Democracy: How Expert Rule Is Giving Way to Shared Governance—And Why Politics Will Never Be the Same*. Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006.

National Civic League. "The Civic Index: Measuring Your Community's Civic Health." Denver, Colo.: National Civic League, 1999.

Putnam, R. D. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992.

Siegel, J. "Democratic Governance: The Art of Civic Engagement." Deliberative Democracy Consortium: Strengthening Democratic Government. National League of Cities, Oct. 15, 2006. Retrieved Sept. 25, 2010, from http://www.nlc.org/ASSETS / 99638D5BBD284737955A91CE019C5D06/Democratic%20Governance%20-%20Powerpoint.ppt.

Ezra J. Temko is a member of the Newark (Delaware) City Council.