An Effective Model for Public Participation Efforts In Developing Sound Public Policy: The League of Minnesota Cities' Cities, Services & Funding Project

Don Reeder, Rachel Walker, and Caitlyn Lothian[1]

> *The point is that public sector organizations desperately need citizens' participation to better understand what they experience, how their experience could be improved and their behavior might be changed.*
> *–Christian Bason[2]*

In 2009, a group of city association leaders in Minnesota, including mayors, city council members, and administrators, came together to discuss major challenges related to the fiscal health of communities in the state. Their assertion was that the current system of funding city services – public safety, public works, parks and recreation, for example – had been slowly eroding and was no longer sustainable:[3]

---

[1] Don Reeder, Assistant Director of Communications for the League of Minnesota Cities, B.A 1982 from Coe College, M.P.A. 2010 from Hamline University. Rachel Walker, Manager of Policy Analysis at the League of Minnesota Cities. Caitlyn Lothian, J.D. 2012 from Hamline University School of Law. The authors would like, collectively, to thank the editorial staff at the Hamline Journal of Public Law and Policy for their assistance with this article.

[2] CHRISTIAN BASON, LEADING PUBLIC SECTOR INNOVATION: CO-CREATING FOR A BETTER SOCIETY 154 (The Policy Press 2010).

[3] LEAGUE OF MINN. CITIES, COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS: MINNESOTANS TALK ABOUT CITIES, SERVICES, AND FUNDING 2 (2012), *available at* http://www.lmc.org/page/1/conversations-csf.jsp [hereinafter COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS].

> Nearly two years ago, the Board of Directors of the League of Minnesota Cities authorized a project called 'Cities, Services, and Funding: Broader Thinking, Better solutions.' The project was based on two important points: that the current system for

Projecting city revenue and expenditure trends into the future reveals that all types of Minnesota cities - cities of every size, in every region, will be broke by the year 2015 if no policy changes are made. And in many kinds of communities, this is a reality today as revenues fall short of what cities need to provide services.[4]

A struggling national economy, changing service needs related to demographics, the rising costs of employee health benefits, massive state cuts in local government aid (LGA) to Minnesota cities over the past decade,[5] and numerous other factors had all taken a toll on the budget-balancing capabilities of city governments.[6] To compound the problem, by law, in Minnesota, cities must balance their budgets, and there is no other government on which municipalities can shift their costs.[7] The future was bleak

---

funding city services in Minnesota is not going to work much longer, and that the help of Minnesota residents is needed in developing solutions for the future. *Id.*

[4] LEAGUE OF MINN. CITIES, CITIES, SERVICES & FUNDING: BROADER THINKING, BETTER SOLUTIONS - THE PROJECTED FUTURE OF CITY BUDGETS THROUGH 2025 1 (2010), *available at* http://www.lmc.org/media/document/1/citybudgetprojections.pdf?inline=true [hereinafter CITY BUDGETS]; *see* OFFICE OF THE STATE AUDITOR, MINNESOTA CITY FINANCES: 2010 REVENUES, EXPENDITURES, AND DEBT 3-4 (2012), *available at* http://www.osa.state.mn.us/reports/gid/2010/ciRed/ciRed_10_Report.pdf [hereinafter STATE AUDITOR].

[5] *See* STATE AUDITOR, *supra* note 4, at 7, Fig. 1.

In addition, the proportion of total revenues derived from property taxes grew from 24 percent in 2001 to 38 percent in 2010. During this same time frame, revenues derived from intergovernmental sources decreased from 31 percent of total revenues to 26 percent. Figure 1 below shows that, as intergovernmental revenues to cities have slowed, the result has been a greater reliance on revenues derived from property taxes. *Id.*

[6] *See* CITY BUDGETS, *supra* note 4, at appendix.

[7] *Id.* at 1; MINN. STAT. § 412.701 (2011).

The manager shall prepare the estimates for the annual budget. The budget shall be by funds and shall include all the funds of the city, except the funds made up of proceeds of bond issues, utility funds, and special assessment funds, and may include

for Minnesota cities, and it was apparent to city officials that new public policy was required.

Moreover, the city officials, who were also members of the Board of Directors from the state's largest municipal-government association, the League of Minnesota Cities (the League), lamented the fact that the scope of the problem was extremely difficult to communicate to residents.[8] The League noted that many residents were cynical about the complexities of local government or too busy with the demanding pace of their own lives to be actively engaged in community affairs.[9] Still, the League proposed an

---

any of such funds at the discretion of the council. The estimates of expenditures for each fund budgeted shall be arranged for each department or division of the city . . . Ordinary expenses shall be subdivided . . . All increases and decreases shall be clearly shown. In parallel columns shall be added the amounts granted and the amounts expended under similar heads for the past two completed fiscal years and the current fiscal year, actual to date and estimated for the balance of the year. In addition to the estimates of expenditures, the budget shall include for each budgeted fund a statement of the revenues which have accrued for the past two completed fiscal years with the amount collected and the uncollected balances together with the same information, based in so far as necessary on estimates, for the current fiscal year, and an estimate of the revenues for the ensuing fiscal year. *Id.*

[8] As Betsy Hodges, a League of Minnesota Cities Board member put it in a non-public meeting, "We may not know the answers but we do know the questions – how sustainable is the current system of funding city government and how do we get citizens to understand and care about what the future holds for the city services they rely on?"

[9] *See* ALLIANCE FOR INNOVATION, CONNECTED COMMUNITIES: LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AS A PARTNER IN CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNITY BUILDING 4 (James H. Svara & Janet Denhardt, eds., 2010), *available at* http://icma.org/en/icma/knowledge_network/documents/kn/document/301763/co nnected_communities_local_governments_as_a_partner_in_citizen_engagement_ and_community_building [hereinafter ALLIANCE FOR INNOVATION] ("Many observers of the current political scene suggest that we are witnessing a rise in 'enraged' citizens rather than 'engaged' citizens. Experience with town meetings hijacked by partisans seems to indicate that inviting participation is asking for confrontation and discord.").

initiative that would involve Minnesota residents as a means to develop public policy.

Rather than developing policies and recommendations with public administration professionals, the League embarked on an unprecedented project to address the concerns of their members.[10] The primary goal of that plan, known as the "Cities, Services, and Funding: Broader Thinking, Better Solutions" initiative (CSF), was to engage people throughout Minnesota.[11] The CSF project was designed to engage residents, and eventually key influencers of public policy and opinion, in serious, broad-based dialogue on the services Minnesotans expect to receive in their communities, how those services can be best delivered, and how to pay for the services.[12]

Citizen engagement efforts, in general, are used to generate solutions to a particular problem.[13] The CSF project was different,

---

[10] COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 2 ("[T]he Community Conversations represent a compelling way forward in encouraging members of the community to be involved in identifying thoughtful solutions to service and funding challenges faced at the city government level - the level of government closes to the people.").

[11] *Id.* at 4.

[12] LEAGUE OF MINN. CITIES, CITIES, SERVICES & FUNDING: BROADER THINKING, BETTER SOLUTIONS, http://lmc.org/page/1/cities-services-funding.jsp (last visited Sept. 7, 2012) [hereinafter BETTER SOLUTIONS].

[13] *See* James Svara & Janet Denhardt, *Overview: Citizen Engagement, Why and How?*, *in* ALLIANCE FOR INNOVATION, CONNECTED COMMUNITIES: LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AS A PARTNER IN CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNITY BUILDING 7 (James H. Svara & Janet Denhardt, eds., 2010), *available at* http://icma.org/en/icma/knowledge_network/documents/kn/document/301763/connected_communit ies_local_governments_as_a_partner_in_citizen_engagement_and_community_b uilding.

> On the other hand, from an instrumental or 'smart' perspective, we should work to increase citizen involvement because local governments cannot solve community problems alone. In other words, involvement is a means to an end. Effective governance at the local level increasingly requires active and ongoing citizen participation in planning, policymaking, implementation, and service delivery. The complexity of

in that the project was used to generate a gamut of input that could be used when cities develop public policy options, including tax policy, land use policy, public safety policy, economic development, and social service policy. The CSF model illustrates that residents should be engaged in policy decisions on a local level, and provides a framework on how to construct similar endeavors. CSF is a replicable public participation model that should be used to address the concerns of individual cities, develop statewide policies for municipalities, and generally increase citizen participation in local government.[14]

The important theme is that a project like CSF should be used to involve residents efficiently in local government decisions, and there are five important characteristics that distinguish the CSF project from other public participation efforts.[15] First, the CSF model is a highly effective educational tool.[16] Second, the CSF model exemplifies the appropriate way for public officials to engage with residents.[17] Third, the CSF model advances the public policy of public engagement as a more productive model, because city officials were not part of the discussions with the residents in the Community Conversations, and this allowed residents to openly express their ideas and participate in policy discussions meaningfully.[18] Fourth, the Community Conversations took place

---

problems facing local government demands citizen involvement and acceptance, if not cooperation. . . . In some situations, only citizens can come up with a solution to a particular problem. *Id.*

[14] This article serves as a summary of the process of developing and implementing the CSF project. This article is the template for the replication of the project for organizations and municipalities within and without Minnesota.

[15] *See* COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3 at 4, 22-23.

[16] *Id.* at 11. *See infra* text accompanying notes 138-140.

[17] COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 22. *See infra* text accompanying notes 141-142.

[18] NAT'L COAL. FOR DIALOGUE & DELIBERATION, INT'L ASS'N FOR PUB. PARTICIPATION & CO-INTELLIGENCE INST., CORE PRINCIPLES FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT 8 (2009) *available at* http://ncdd.org/rc/wp-content/uploads/

at meetings that were already occurring.[19] Fifth, the CSF project is a successful development in the public policy of engaging residents in local government discussions and decisions in that it has led to cities involving residents in ongoing conversations about the city.[20]

Part I of this article describes the theoretical background for the CSF project. Part II introduces the process of development and partnerships cultivated in creating the CSF project. Part III presents a brief summary of the findings.[21] Finally, Part IV describes what the effect of the CSF model is and how it will be used in the future.

I.   A Brief Background of Citizen Participation and Public Policy and the Current Practices in Minnesota

Community engagement is vital for the future of our cities as we look to providing cost-effective services with the focus on quality of life. We all need to work together to find the right directions for a productive future, and that makes effective communication with citizens essential.
–Janet Anderson[22]

To understand the nature and scope of the CSF project, some basics definitions and principles of public involvement and citizen engagement must be explained. This is by no means an

---

2010/08/PEPfinal-expanded.pdf [hereinafter DIALOGUE & DELIBERATION]. *See infra* text accompanying notes 143-144.

[19] COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 22 ("Working with partners is critical to engaging the public in conversation."). *See infra* text accompanying notes 145-147.

[20] COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 22. *See infra* text accompanying notes 148-149.

[21] *See* COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 12-19 (describing the detailed results of the Community Conversations).

[22] *Id.* at 25 (quoting Councilmember Janet Anderson, City of Austin).

authoritative review on the subject, but it is essential to understand how the various processes relate to one another.[23]

A.   A Brief Introduction to Citizen Engagement and Public Participation

First, there are various levels of public engagement, which can be characterized as a continuum from one-way communication on one end to shared dialogue and process on the other.[24] The term "citizen engagement" refers to the broadest level of public involvement "encompassing all the many roles and activities through which people take an active part in community life."[25] The next broadest category of public involvement is public participation, wherein people learn more about policies that affect them and have a greater role in developing these policies.[26] Lastly, collaborative governance "involves the general public and others in informed and reasoned discussions that seek to influence public sector decision-making."[27] Collaborative governance takes three forms, but the forums for public deliberation are most pertinent because these "facilitated forums allow members of the general public to participate in reasoned discussions that generally result in recommendations to be considered by public officials in their

---

[23] For more information about citizen engagement and public participation, *See e.g.*, ALLIANCE FOR INNOVATION, *supra* note 9; INST. FOR LOCAL GOV'T: COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE INITIATIVE, PLANNING PUBLIC FORUMS: QUESTIONS TO GUIDE LOCAL OFFICIALS (2007), *available at* http://cnrep.org/documents/handbooks/
Planning_Public_Forums.pdf [hereinafter QUESTIONS TO GUIDE]; DIALOGUE & DELIBERATION, *supra* note 18; William Saintamour & Tom Huggler, *Back to the Base: Citizen Involvement and the Budget Process*, 26 GOV'T FIN. R. 5 (2010); MATT LEIGHNINGER, CITIZENS BUILDING COMMUNITIES: THE ABCS OF PUBLIC DIALOGUE (2005), *available at* http://www.lwv.org/files/LWV_Dialouge_web.pdf.
[24] Svara & Denhardt, *supra* note 13, at 8.
[25] QUESTIONS TO GUIDE, *supra* note 23, at 2.
[26] *Id.*
[27] *Id.*

decision-making."[28] Common characteristics of public forums include the participation of large, diverse groups of people, the use of both large and small-group dialogues, facilitators to move the conversation along, the provision of basic information from the organizers, and participants provide specific policy input.[29]

Second, in developing the CSF project, the League consulted and adopted characteristics and principles developed to facilitate public engagement.[30] The National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation has seven principles for public engagement: (1) careful planning and preparation; (2) inclusion and ·demographic diversity; (3) collaboration and shared purpose; (4) openness and learning; (5) transparency and trust; (6) impact and action; and (7) sustained engagement and participatory culture.[31] Research suggests that effective public participation and citizen engagement leads to a sense of community, trust, creative problem solving, and "even increase[s] the likelihood that citizens will support financial investments in community projects."[32] However, the level of citizen involvement deemed effective is often debated.[33]

---

[28] *Id.*

[29] LEIGHNINGER, *supra* note 23, at 1.

[30] QUESTIONS TO GUIDE, *supra* note 23, at 1 ("Typically in such forums, members of the public participate in reasoned discussions that result in new ideas, visions, general preferences, or detailed recommendations. In turn, these results are considered by policymakers and help shape public decisions and actions.").

[31] DIALOGUE & DELIBERATION, *supra* note 18, at 3.

[32] Svara & Denhardt, *supra* note 13, at 5.

[33] David L. Markell & Tom R. Tyler, *Using Empirical Research to Design Government Citizen Participation Processes: A Case Study of Citizens' Roles in Environmental Compliance and Enforcement,* 57 U. KAN. L. REV. 1, 1 (2009); *see e.g.,* Mark Seidenfeld, *A Civic Republican Justification for the Bureaucratic State,* 105 HARV. L. REV. 1511, 1516-28 (1992); Jody Freeman, *The Private Role in Public Governance,* 75 N.Y.U. L. REV. 543, 547 (2000); Sidney A. Shapiro, *Administrative Law After the Counter-Reformation: Restoring Faith in Pragmatic Government,* 48 U. KAN. L. REV. 689, 689-90 (2000); Richard B. Stewart, *Administrative Law in the Twenty-First Century,* 78 N.Y.U. L. REV. 437, 439-40 (2003); Richard B. Stewart, *The Reformation of American Administrative Law,* 88 HARV. L. REV. 1669, 1672-73 (1975); Jerry L. Mashaw, *Due Process In The Administrative State,* 11 AM. B. FOUND. RES. J 23, 29 (1985) ("Participation

B.   The Legal Framework for Citizen Engagement and Public Participation in the United States and Minnesota

After World War II, the federal government began mandating citizen participation for various issues[34] Research by David Markell and Tom Tyler identified numerous environmental issues in which citizens participated,[35] and environmental topics remain one of the most heavily participatory areas of the federal government.[36] Congress, additionally, has supported citizen participation efforts in other topics.[37]

---

has costs as well as benefits."); Jim Rossi, *Participation Run Amok: The Costs of Mass Participation for Deliberative Agency Decision-making,* 92 NW. U. L. REV. 173, 177 (1997) ("Political theorists have often suggested that mass participation is not always a positive good for democracy.").

[34] Mark D. Robbins & Bill Simonsen, *Citizen Participation: Goals and Methods,* *in* ALLIANCE FOR INNOVATION, CONNECTED COMMUNITIES: LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AS A PARTNER IN CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNITY BUILDING 62 (James H. Svara & Janet Denhardt, eds., Oct. 15, 2010) *available at* http://icma.org/en/icma/
knowledge_network/documents/kn/document/301763/connected_communities_l ocal_governments_as_a_partner_in_citizen_engagement_and_community_buildi ng.

[35] Markell & Tyler, *supra* note 33, at 6.

[36] *See also,* David Markell, *The Role of Spotlighting Procedures in Promoting Citizen Participation, Transparency, and Accountability,* 45 WAKE FOREST L. REV. 425, 426 (2010); Markell & Tyler, *supra* note 33, at 6 ("We identified eleven types of opportunities for citizens in the United States to participate in environmental enforcement and compliance."); William A. Tilleman, *Public Participation in the Environmental Impact Assessment Process: A Comparative Study of Impact Assessment in Canada, the United States and the European Community,* 33 COLUM. J. TRANSNAT'L L. 337 (1995) (arguing for greater public participation in environmental impact process analyses).

[37] *See, e.g.* Cary Coglianese, *Citizen Participation in Rulemaking: Past. Present, and Future,* 55 DUKE L.J. 943, 943-45 (2006); Cary Coglianese, *Internet and Citizen Participation in Rulemaking,* I J.L. & POL'Y FOR THE INFO. SOC'Y 33, 42-43 (2005); Rossi, *supra* note 33, at 174-175. Additionally, the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) provides an "opportunity for citizen engagement that was intended to enhance government accountability and educate the citizenry,

State and local governments followed suit shortly thereafter.[38] In Minnesota, codifying commitment to citizen participation efforts has been slow, but there are a few instances of it. For example, the Public Utilities Commission has statutory authority to implement citizen participation models:

> The [Public Utilities] commission shall adopt broad spectrum citizen participation as a principal of operation. The form of public participation shall not be limited to public hearings and advisory task forces and shall be consistent with the commission's rules and guidelines. . .[39]

Additionally, under the Regional Development Act of 1969, a regional development commission could appoint an advisory committee of "interested and affected citizens" to assist in the review of plans and programs before the commission.[40] There is not much information about how these citizen participation efforts have or have not worked in Minnesota, but the CSF project by the League provides a replicable model. Residents in Minnesota gained a valuable opportunity to participate in the development of public policy when the League developed the CSF project.

---

though some have claimed it is unnecessary while others have questioned its effectiveness." Markell & Tyler, *supra* note 33, at 3 n. 9. *See* Seth F. Kreimer, *The Freedom of Information Act and the Ecology of Transparency* (Univ. of Pa. Law Sch. Pub. Law & Legal Theory Research Paper Series, Research Paper No. 08-06).

[38] Robbins & Simonsen, *supra* note 34, at 62.

[39] MINN. STAT. § 216E.08 subd. 2 (2011).

[40] MINN. STAT. § 462.394 (2011).

II. Developing the Cities, Services & Funding Project

After determining the need to engage in a broader conversation about the status and future of Minnesota cities,[41] the League developed a four-part initiative, the CSF project.[42]

A. The Four-Part Initiative: Research, Awareness, Information-Gathering, and Policy Development

The first phase centered on an analysis completed by the Hubert H. Humphrey School at the University of Minnesota, which served as a catalyst for a statewide discussion about the future funding of city services.[43] The core element of the analysis was a projection of city finances.[44] The projection demonstrated that if cities remain on their current paths and no policy changes are made, all types of cities in all regions of the state would be broke by the year 2015.[45]

---

[41] *See supra* text accompanying notes 3-9.

[42] COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 2 (stating that InCommons, of the Bush Foundation, provided financial support for the initiative).

[43] *Id.* at 10 (describing the first phase of the project by the Hubert H. Humphrey School at University of Minnesota and that "the projection formed the foundation for Community Conversation discussions.").

[44] CITY BUDGETS, *supra* note 4, at 2 (concluding that "[p]roperty taxes remain flat, meaning any growth in property tax revenues comes from tax base increases . . . . Inflation was set at 2 percent . . . . LGA was reduced by $50 million for 2010 . . . LGA is then held flat through 2025 . . . . MVHC reimbursements were reduced 11.5 percent in 2010 . . . MVHC is then held flat through 2025 . . . . The projections assume that cities maintain sufficient reserves to comply with the State Auditor's position on fund balances.").

[45] *Id.* at 3.

> Based on those historical trends and assuming current policies continue unchanged, they projected that total city revenues will increase at an annual rate of 3.7 percent between 2010 and 2025 and that total city expenditures will grow at an annual rate of 5.5 percent in that time period. . . . Cities are facing and will continue to face several cost pressures that are beyond local

The second phase of the initiative required the League to raise awareness of the issues. The League publicized the Humphrey projection and the erosion of funding systems for Minnesota cities through both conventional means (presentations, news releases), but also through social media distribution.[46] The League commissioned Haberman Storytellers, a Michigan firm, to produce two infographic videos.[47] The League also promoted the CSF initiative at the 2011 and 2012 Minnesota State Fair.[48]

---

control such as the price of fuel, rising health care costs, foreclosures, and changing demographics. *Id.*

[46] For more information about access the social media distribution channels, including a blog page, Twitter, YouTube channel, and Facebook page, *see* BETTER SOLUTIONS, *supra* note 12. Additionally, the League collaborated with the local PBS affiliate, Twin Cities Public Television, to produce and air a series of related interstitials – 90-second spots that aired between programming in lieu of commercial advertisements. *See Outside the Ox: Community Conversations #1* (League of Minnesota Cities, 2011), *available at* http://www.youtube.com/watch ?v=WAF_wP4iFa8&feature=plcp; *Outside the Ox: Community Conversations #2* (League of Minnesota Cities, 2011), *available at* http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_zJpt7mL65Q&feature=plcp; *Outside the Ox: Community Conversations #3* (League of Minnesota Cities, 2011), *available at* http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L-ScKyhf6I4&feature=plcp; and *Outside the Ox: Community Conversations #4* (League of Minnesota Cities, 2011), *available at* http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=utNgXtepjHU&feature=plcp.

[47] *See Outside the Ox: Ideas, Opinions & Common Sense* (Outside the Ox, Aug. 23, 2010), *available at* http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTJ6IA67dhs&feature=player_embedded.; *Outside the Ox: We all awake . . .*, (Outside the Ox, May 24, 2010), *available at* http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYYaKouRb44 &feature=player_embedded. To date, the videos have been viewed about 12,000 times on YouTube, and were shown at dozens of public events, including city council meetings, public policy conferences, citizen engagement events, and college classrooms.

[48] Don Reeder, *Through comments and bean counting, fairgoers weigh-in on city services and funding*, CITIES MATTER BLOG (Sept. 8, 2011), *available at* http://mncitiesmatter.blogspot.com/ (click on "Older Posts" to find this blog entry). The League engaged more than 12,000 fairgoers in 2011 in a myriad ways ranging from distribution of road maps featuring children's car-ride games and activities focused on city services, to a "City Bean Counter" activity. In the bean counter game, individuals were given a budget consisting of six dry pinto beans

The research and awareness phases were designed primarily to increase attention and interest in the third phase, a series of "Community Conversations" involving direct engagement of city residents.[49] The primary goal of the Community Conversations was to engage residents in conversations about city services, service delivery, and funding in order to inform better, more sustainable policy solutions for Minnesota communities.[50] As part of each Community Conversation, a brief presentation educated and informed participants.[51] The presentation focused on the city services Minnesotans rely on, including similarities and differences across the state, the fiscal futures cities face, and the importance of

---

and asked to allocate those beans among eight common city services in order to simulate a city budget-balancing exercise. The results for 2011 were as follows: Police: 7,243, Clean Water: 6,872; Fire: 5,608; Libraries: 5,316; Parks & Recreation: 4,969; Senior Services: 4,306; Streets & Sidewalks: 4,213; Sewers & Garbage: 4,004. *Id.* In 2012, about 6,450 people participated in the Bean Counter game, and the preliminary results are as follows: Clean Water: 6,186; Fire: 4,768; Libraries: 5,480; Parks & Rec: 4,473; Police: 5,184; Senior Services: 4,159; Sewers & Garbage: 4,065; Streets & Sidewalks: 4,438. Don Reeder, *Clean Water, libraries, police and fire lead the way among city bean counters*, CITIES MATTER BLOG (Sept. 6, 2012), *available at* http://mncitiesmatter.blogspot.com/.

[49] BETTER SOLUTIONS, *supra* note 12 ("The point of this effort is to engage the city community, policymakers, and the general public in conversations about the financial conditions cities are facing now and in the years to come.").

[50] COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 4.

> The League wanted to do several things with the Community Conversations component of the Cities, Services, and Funding Project. Among them: to involve residents from Minnesota cities of all sizes and locations in serious discussions about the future of city services. To encourage participation among a diverse group of Minnesotans. To give background information in an objective way. To ask questions clearly and effectively so that useful information and opinions could be collected from participants. *Id.*

[51] *Id.* ("At each conversation, participants were given brief background presentations. Each presentation included an explanation of a projection that was prepared for the League by the Hubert H. Humphrey School at the University of Minnesota. . .").

public engagement in dialogue, and how cities pay for services.[52] About 730 Minnesotans participated in the Community Conversation phase of CSF.[53]

These Community Conversations took the shape of town hall-like meetings.[54] This information-gathering method was selected for three reasons. First, the format made for a casual and civil atmosphere, which allowed participants to discuss their opinions and ideas openly and freely without fear of being judged or ridiculed.[55] Second, this format provided enough time for discussion of complex issues.[56] Third, the design facilitated thoughtful discussion to help participants understand both positive and negative consequences of policy decisions, and "lead to a meaningful dialogue that moved beyond the sound bite rhetoric that often dominates policy discussions."[57] The findings from these Community Conversations were intended to become the foundation for the fourth phase of the CSF initiative: action at both state and local levels, including new policy directions and legislative

---

[52] *Id.* This aligns with other citizen participation projects. *See* LEIGHNINGER, *supra* note 23, at 4 (summarizing recommendations from the League of Women Voters. Such background information "must be factual and non-controversial; the choices, approaches or arguments you want citizens to consider must be described fairly, and none of the major viewpoints should be omitted; information accessibility is especially important for the participation of young people, people with lower levels of education and people who speak little or no English.").

[53] COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 4.

[54] *Id.*

[55] *Id.*

[56] *Id.*

[57] *Id.* Part of this required the League to avoid technical jargon during the presentation and the Community Conversations. *See* LEIGHNINGER, *supra* note 23, at 2 ("The issue should also be described in non-technical language, so that ordinary people feel that they have something to say. . . . Citizens are certainly capable of dealing with technical questions, but if you avoid jargon as much as possible, people will be more inclined to participate and better able to get to the root of the issue.").

proposals, and better-informed decisions on services, service delivery, and funding alternatives.[58]

B.   Developing and Planning the Community Conversations

Forty cities submitted applications to serve as host communities for the Community Conversations.[59] From those forty cities, the League chose twelve cities based on the city's ability to identify and engage community groups that could recruit and deliver demographically diverse groups of participants.[60] This

---

[58] *CSF Community Conversations*, LEAGUE OF MINN. CITIES, http://www.lmc.org/page/1/conversations-csf.jsp (last visited Dec. 9, 2012).
> This summer, the League's legislative policy committees reviewed the report's findings for consideration while crafting new policies and policy revisions that will serve as the League's foundation for advocacy efforts in the 2013 state legislative session. For example, the League's Improving Service Delivery Policy Committee discussed how the citizen input described in the report can drive policy discussions at the Legislature, in particular the League's policy on Redesigning and Reinventing Government. The committee is currently drafting new policy language that is expected to be adopted at its third and final policy meeting on Sept. 24. The final draft will then be posted on the League's website for additional input from city officials throughout the state before the Board of Directors formally adopts the 2013 policies on Nov. 8. *Id.*

[59] COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 4. Cities participating in the project potentially had much to gain – most of all a group of citizens who, through their direct participation in Community Conversations have a deeper understanding of city government, the issues and trends facing cities throughout the state, and the tradeoffs city officials grapple with; and who are likely to engage in further conversations that are more locally focused. Moreover, post-conversation surveys showed that participant knowledge about city services increased dramatically after taking part in the Community Conversations. Most participants left the Conversations energized and wanting more information. Many of them expressed interest in participating in future meetings on city issues that are hosted by their own communities. *Id.* at 11.

[60] *Id.* at 4.

commitment to achieving a demographically diverse group of participants reflects the public engagement principle that "participants reflect the range of stakeholder or demographic diversity within the community" and "special effort is made to enable normally marginalized, silent, or dissenting voices to meaningfully engage."[61] League officials believed that the combination of cities chosen provided a good demographic base, and the cities selected varied in sources of revenue streams, size, city composition, geographical diversity, and the role of the city in its region.[62]

In developing the content and design for the Community Conversations, the League collaborated with the University of Minnesota Extension Services.[63] After training, the League embarked on two trial runs of the Community Conversations.[64]

---

[61] DIALOGUE & DELIBERATION, *supra* note 18, at 7.

[62] League of Minn. Cities, Community Conversations: What Minnesotans Had to Say (PowerPoint Presentation, slide 4, notes, *available at* http://www.lmc.org/page/1/conversations-csf.jsp, under the "View the Community Conversations PowerPoint Presentation (ppt)" link).

[63] COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 4. For more information about the University of Minnesota Extension Services, see *About Extension*, UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA, http://www1.extension.umn.edu/about/ (last visited Sept. 7, 2012). Educators from Extension Services were particularly helpful in training League staff about small group facilitation on how "to best engage and encourage conversation among participants, handle potentially difficult situations among individuals or groups, and use active listening and reflecting skills." COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 4. *See* LEIGHNINGER, *supra* note 23, at 4, for the qualifications and characteristics of facilitators ("Equip your facilitators or moderators with written materials so that they can be knowledgeable, but do not ask them to be 'experts' who provide their opinions on the topic.").

[64] League staff engaged students from an urban affairs class at Minnesota State University-Mankato to test possible interview approaches as part of a class project in late 2010. A preliminary single-session pilot meeting held with residents from the City of Onamia was also helpful in questionnaire design and facilitation flow.

C.   Conversations Content Community

The content of the conversations was designed to focus on Minnesota cities overall, not on any one particular city. Thus, participants were directed to think about cities generally, and not only about the participant's city of residence. Conversation content was divided into four distinct sessions.[65] The first session in each community focused on city services – what city services Minnesotans rely on today and the kinds of services they will need to rely on in the future.[66] The second session was devoted to the delivery of city services.[67] The third session focused on how cities should pay for city services.[68] This third session included facilitator questions with "yes" or "no" answer options, providing for a minor element of quantitative evaluation of funding mechanism preferences.[69] In the fourth and final session in each community, participants were asked to share values they want state and local leaders to consider when they are making tough choices about the services that cities will provide, the ways those services are provided, and how the services are to be financed.[70]

---

[65] COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 5.

[66] For results, see COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 12-13; *see infra* text accompanying notes 78-90.

[67] For results, see COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 14-15; *see infra* text accompanying notes 91-108.

[68] For results, see COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 21, at 16-17; *see infra* text accompanying notes 109-121.

[69] *See* COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 17 (including questions, such as "show people who don't have a home or business in the community pay for some of the costs too?"; "should the state spend money on making sure there are quality services for all regardless of where people live in the state?"; and questions that required participants to state whether they liked or disliked an idea).

[70] For results, *see id.* at 19; *see also infra* text accompanying notes 122-136. This particular meeting allowed for the free-flow of ideas by encouraging participants to consider any values or considerations that would assist decision makers. This exemplifies the type of citizen engagement advanced by Arlene Goldbard: "Citizens can be reached and engaged if they are offered ways to take part that are interesting and satisfying in themselves, that combine learning and doing, that

After the twelve cities were selected, the four conversations were scheduled in each community to occur over a three- to four-day period.[71] Community Conversations were held at already occurring meetings: meetings of the Chamber of Commerce or Rotary Club, local colleges and churches, at senior centers, and other places where people regularly gathered.[72] For the fourth and

---

engaged not only their participation, but their creativity." Arlene Goldbard, *The Art of Engagement: Creativity in the Service of Citizenship*, in ALLIANCE FOR INNOVATION, CONNECTED COMMUNITIES: LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AS A PARTNER IN CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNITY BUILDING 107 (James H. Svara & Janet Denhardt, eds., 2010), *available at* http://icma.org/en/icma/knowledge_network/documents/ kn/document/301763/connected_communities_local_governments_as_a_partner_ in_citizen_engagement_and_community_building.

[71] Visits to the sites began with the first city in April of 2011, and the final one in October. COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 2.

[72] *Id.* at 4. Rather than send out general calls for all city residents to attend one of the first three meetings in each community, the League worked with community organizations that had regularly scheduled meetings or standard gatherings to invite community residents—such as a lunchtime gathering in the conference room or lunchroom of a local workplace, a dinner gathering at a school following parent pick-up time, or morning donuts in a church basement between services. *See* QUESTIONS TO GUIDE, *supra* note 23, at 11. Gathering where engaged citizens were already meeting allowed the League to use some basic incentives. *See* LEIGHNINGER, *supra* note 23, at 4 ("Citizens are usually more likely to come to an event if they know there will be time for socializing, if child care will be provided, if transportation or parking is accessible, and if there will be food."). By October of 2011, organizations that hosted community conversation sessions included six business-related groups. (employers, associations, chambers of commerce), six senior organizations, six non-profit or civic groups, five Rotary clubs, four groups of college students and staff, two church congregations, two parent groups, two non-English speaking groups (Spanish-speaking), and one youth council, among others. COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 6. *See* NAT'L LEAGUE OF CITIES CTR., RESEARCH & INNOVATION, BEYOND CIVILITY: FROM PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT TO PROBLEM SOLVING 5 (2011), *available at* http://www.nlc.org/find-city-solutions/center-for-research-and-innovation/governance-and-civic-engagement/democratic-governance-and-civic-engagement/beyond-civility-from-public-engagement-to-problem-solving ("Many cities are taking steps to expand the circle of public engagement to audiences that traditionally have not been involved. One action city leaders can

final meeting in each community, invitations were issued to those participating in any one of the first three meetings plus any other interested resident of the community.[73] Although participants were self-selected, League staff made an attempt to mirror actual state demographics among conversation participants through scheduling organizations with members who are representative of the state's gender, age, and ethnic distributions.[74]

III.   An Overview of the Results of the Community Conversations[75]

As part of the Conversation program design, participants at each Community Conversation provided a brief background presentation that included an explanation of the projection prepared for the League by the Hubert H. Humphrey School at the University of Minnesota.[76] After some brief instruction by a large group facilitator, participants were divided into small groups of four to six individuals to answer and discuss a series of questions prompted by a trained small-group facilitator for the reminder of the ninety-

---

consider is inviting young people to play a more meaningful role in the problem solving.").

[73] COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 5 ("In each community, the fourth and final conversation was for those who participated in any of the first three conversations and members of the broader community.").

[74] *Id.* at 8-9 (finding that through this informal participant selection process, respondent demographics came close to matching state levels in all three conversations).

[75] For a more detailed analysis of the results, *see id.* at 11-19. Any quotations from participants in the footnotes following are unattributed to protect their identity. The quotes are attributed to the city in Minnesota in which the quotation took place.

[76] *Id.* at 11 (displaying the infographic. At the small group tables, each participant was given a handout that portrayed what services cities provide and how they are paid for with illustrations representing "reservoirs" of revenue sources. The flip-side of the infographic page listed services that are offered by all, most, or some Minnesota cities. Participants were encouraged to take the infographic with them after the Community Conversation concluded).

minute conversation.[77] Each of the four meetings was held once in each community, and the analysis below refers to the meetings by their content, and generally, their order, without reference to the individual city in which the meeting took place.

A. Meeting One: Relying on City Services

The first conversation in each community focused on city services – what city services Minnesotans rely on today and the kinds of services they will need to rely on in the future.[78] Participants were asked to name the services that they personally could do without, or with less of, and which ones communities in general could do without, or with less of.[79] The session was formatted with the use of specific open-ended discussion questions, followed by probes.[80]

Minnesotans identified many different city services that they rely upon in their daily lives: police, fire, ambulance, streets, water, parks,[81] transportation and the library.[82] It was common for people

---

[77] *Id.* at 4. *See* DIALOGUE & DELIBERATION, *supra* note 18, at 9.

> Skilled, impartial facilitators and simple guidelines encourage everyone involved to share their views, listen, and be curious in order to learn things . . . about the issues before them . . . . This exploratory atmosphere enables them to delve more deeply into complexities and nuances and thereby generate new understandings, possibilities, and / or decisions that were not clear when their conversations began. *Id.*

The research design for gathering information resembled a qualitative model, but the primary intention of the conversations was to facilitate community engagement rather than serve as a platform for formal data collection.

[78] Participants were encouraged to think about cities in all parts of the state—where they have friends or family members, where they go to work, where they shop, play or worship. COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 5.

[79] *Id.* at 12.

[80] *Id.* at 5 ("After some brief instruction from a facilitator, participants were divided into small groups to answer and discuss a series of questions for the remainder of the 90-minute conversation.").

[81] Minnesotans talked fondly of their parks and park programs, frequently describing parks as a reason why people choose to live in a place and as a way to

to describe police, fire and ambulance as essential or basic services, and many included water and streets.[83]

When thinking about the city services important to them in the future, Minnesotans largely focused their conversations on services for seniors, i.e. housing, recreation and meal services, and on transportation,[84] parks, and the library.[85] Participants stated that

---

attract visitors. "I'd also like to emphasize I think quality of life services are important. I think parks, I think recreational trails, hockey rinks, ice rinks, those type of items are important to the community and also add a lot of, I don't know, have a lot of interest as far as from outsiders to the community as well." Quote from a participant in the City of Moorhead, Minnesota. Quotes from participants are unattributed to protect their anonymity. *See also* John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Knight Soul of the Community 2010, Why People Live Where They Live and Why It Matters: A National Perspective, Minnesota St. Paul 13 (2010), *available at* http://www.soulofthecommunity.org/sites/default/files/STPAUL.pdf ("About two-thirds of residents rate the availability of parks, playgrounds, and trails highly.").

[82] COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 12 (indicating that for many Minnesotans, the library is a community resource, a place to gather and connect as a community.

[83] *Id.* For example, a participant from Saint James, Minnesota, stated,

> I kind of look at it like as Maslow's hierarchy. The bottom line resources, of course, your sewer and your fire and your police, those bottom line services. The other things like your libraries and your parks create the quality of life in your community that creates the critical nature. So I think they're all important, but of course your baseline services are the ones that – food, clothing, shelter, well, that would be your city, your streets, your clean water, fire, ambulance that would be your baseline. But you know, that's the baseline.

It was also often mentioned that essential services are the ones communities have to have even if people do not use them every day.

[84] *Id.* (stating that in many communities, participants talked about transportation in general, pointing out that more transportation would be needed for accessing healthcare and jobs, to get rural residents to cities, to serve the disabled, and to reduce single-occupancy traffic).

[85] *Id.* For example, a participant in Austin, Minnesota stated "And I want to stay here in my community. So I'm looking at being able to get around in my community, being safe in my community, and having support services to keep me here. That means we need young people that are educated that want to stay here

aging residents in their communities would need help with things like getting to appointments, nutrition, and safe homes.[86] The participants also discussed the appropriate levels of city services.[87]

Overall, however, Minnesotans struggled to name services that they would reduce.[88] There was concern for which groups of people would be harmed by cuts.[89] People shared ideas of how to do things differently, including using volunteers, sharing services

---

and work here. And this whole sense of vibrancy and growth is what we need to do that, I think."

[86] *Id.*

[87] *Id.* When discussing the future levels of city services, some city services, such as public safety and infrastructure, were considered essential. Other services, were also mentioned; some talked about using city parks more because "they would have more free time and that population growth would create a need for more parks and open space." Others talked about cutting back on park maintenance or relying on volunteers instead of parks being a city responsibility. A lot of conversation time focused on the library. Some talked about using the library more in their free time; others commented that a physical library might be an outdated idea because of technology changes.

[88] COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 12. However, during the conversations, some did suggest cuts to ice rinks, golf courses, pools and park programs. Participants acknowledged that cuts would affect quality of life and ability to attract people and families; they commented that many of the things that might be easier to cut are what make cities pleasant places to live. Library changes were frequently mentioned and people pointed out that libraries were already changing because of technology and the Internet. In several communities, people pointed out that library cuts would hurt the poor, the disabled and those needing Internet access for job searches.

[89] *See id.* For example, one person for Eden Prairie, Minnesota, commented:

> One of the things that – my background was working in the not
> for profit sector – almost all the services that come along came
> along because somebody thought there was a need. And there
> were good people who were committed to getting it done,
> whether it be volunteers, staff, or what have you. So I think it's
> very hard for me to just look at these and say, 'Okay, what
> could I do with less of?' Because a lot of these services don't
> involve me. They involve another group of people for whatever
> reason – age or whatever else.

between cities and other local governments, and contracting with private businesses.[90]

B.   Meeting Two: Delivering City Services

The second session was devoted to the delivery of city services.[91] The goal was to get reactions to delivering services in news and different ways, including city-county partnerships, contracting with a private business, and using volunteers.[92] Participants responded to several fictional scenarios describing a hypothetical change that a city might make to a specific city service.[93] The small groups at each meeting were presented with one of three hypothetical scenarios.[94]   Overall, there was strong sentiment that changes to how city services are delivered are necessary given the current economy.[95] There was general agreement that citizen expectations will need to change and

---

[90] One participant from Moorhead, Minnesota, commented on collaboration and partnership:

> Why can't they work together a little bit? Last year, the snow removal was a huge deal. They were out cleaning the sidewalks and the hockey rinks and we had streets closed off. It was the parks department. They have their own budget, their own equipment and their people. The street department couldn't keep up. So why can't we work together, maybe reduce some services, but why can't we be more efficient and work together?

In nearly all communities, volunteerism was discussed at length; participants suggested volunteers for neighborhood clean-up, park maintenance, senior center, library, and community newsletter.

[91] COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 4.

[92] *Id.* at 14-15.

[93] *Id.* at 14. Each scenario was presented with the assumption that cost savings was the main driver behind the change, and focused the kinds of tradeoffs cities might consider as they face difficult choices in how to deliver services.

[94] In addition to the nine unique scenarios, three extra scenarios were supplied to each facilitator in the event of additional conversation time. The scenarios prompted participants to identify changes to services they use that would be acceptable, and what type of changes would be unacceptable.

[95] COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 15.

individuals should do more for themselves and for their communities.[96]

The participants were generally more concerned about the outcomes resulting from a delivery change than the actual change itself.[97] Generally, participants did not care who provides a service as long as it is still available;[98] many commented that as long as residents are made aware of who provides a service, it does not matter who provides it.[99] However, some participants did feel strongly that a name is a source of pride to the community.[100] Participants accepted changes that would result in increased personal responsibility.[101]

"Across all scenarios, changes that affected police, fire, and ambulance service levels were less acceptable to most

---

[96] *Id.* at 14. For example, a participant in Bemidji, Minnesota expressed the feeling: "At some point people need to take responsibility for their community and not expect 'well my taxes were paid so it's time for the city to take care of me.' People need to step up to the plate, to not just sit around and do nothing."

[97] *Id.* at 15. For example, some voiced more concern with a potential increase in response time resulting from forming a joint police department than with the idea of a joint department for police services. An increase in response time was not acceptable to many participants. Many felt that calls should be prioritized so that certain emergencies get top response time.

[98] *Id.* For example, a participant in Hastings illustrated the issue eloquently: "Isn't it better to do a consolidation than the extreme alternative of not having that service? Because that could be a possibility in where we're heading in funding from governments." [Hastings]. "[T]he name . . . on the side of a fire truck doesn't matter as long as it arrives . . . when called."

[99] *Id.*

[100] *Id.* at 14. For example, in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, one participant stated the feeling: "I think it just gives you a good feeling when you see it's your community doing this [public safety response]." Parks and historic buildings were mentioned as being too important to a community's identity to lose in a service change.

[101] COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 14. For example, participants accepted having to drive farther to obtain a building permit if operations were consolidated with the county. There was great support for county provision of library services as well. Participants accepted changes, such as a new location or different hours. However, some were concerned that not everyone would still have access to a library, especially those without transportation.

participants."[102] Participants were largely uncomfortable with the idea of changes that negatively influence the quality and responsiveness of those services they most rely on, such as public safety response times and snowplowing frequency.[103]

One of the major themes from meeting two was the appropriate use of volunteers.[104] Across the state, there was a lot of energy around the idea of providing services through volunteer efforts.[105] Many felt that volunteers could provide services such as park maintenance, some library services, and senior services.[106]

Sometimes, cities consolidate with another city, meaning all city services are merged or combined, and participants were asked to comment on such a policy, both in general and if their own city pursued it.[107] In most of the Community Conversation cities, participants thought that consolidation might work for some cities, such as small or similar cities.[108]

---

[102] *Id.* at 14-15. However, participants were more receptive to the reduction of service levels in some instances. Two groups with younger participants suggested reducing police coverage levels. Some felt that overlap from the county could compensate for a decline in city coverage and did not feel that a reduction in the service would cause an increase in crime.

[103] *Id.* at 15.

[104] *Id.*

[105] *Id.*

[106] *Id.* However, participants stressed that "there would need to be a volunteer coordinator or supervisor on city staff." *Id.* Others had concerns about volunteer burnout, skill level and liability, but many felt these concerns were not necessarily prohibitive of implementing a volunteer program.

[107] COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 15.

[108] *Id.* Interestingly, participants in Greater Minnesota talked about consolidation differently than participants in the metro area. Metro groups talked about additional inconvenience with a larger city area resulting from consolidation. For example, a participant from Hastings wondered:

> Do you save anything? Can they show you your property taxes are gonna [sic] go down or your fees are gonna [sic] go down or what are the benefits? Here's the downside now show me the upside and then I'll decide. It comes down to dollars and cents for the cities and it comes down to dollars and cents and other things for the people in the cities. If you say, 'If we don't merge, we're going to assess you $1000 per year.' Well go

C.   **Meeting Three: Paying for City Services**

In the third meeting in each community, participants answered a range of questions related to paying for city services.[109] They shared their preference between paying fees for services and paying taxes for services.[110] Participants also discussed whether the state should have a role in providing city services, and their opinions about the idea of financially supporting communities other than their community of residence.[111] The questions focused on aspects of paying for services: who should pay, how they should pay, and what the state role should be.[112] .

In conversations about fees versus taxes, about half of the Minnesotans we talked to said they really did not care how they paid for services because both were money out of their pockets.[113] Participating Minnesotans were split in their support for local sales

---

. ahead and merge then. But if it's, 'You won't notice a
difference whether we merge or not,' most people are gonna
[sic] say then don't merger [sic]. It all comes down to how you
are affected individually.

In contrast, non-metro area groups talked about distance as a barrier to a merger.
[109]   COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 17.
[110]   *Id.* at 16.
[111]   *Id.* at 17.
[112]   *Id.* .
[113]   *Id.* at 16. For example, one participant from Eveleth, Minnesota, said: "We want to share the responsibility of being good citizens and providing for our communities and whether they call it a fee or a tax, as long as you're paying on it on a regular basis and working together so that they can get the results you want from it, it's fine." Some clear preferences did emerge as the discussions continued. People want to pay taxes for things that everyone has access to, like streets. They think taxes are fairer and that they take away the element of choice so that things are maintained because everyone is contributing. Minnesotans see fees as the better way to pay for things people do individually—like ski trail passes or building permits. Being able to see exactly what the money is used for is what people liked about fees. Many people expressed concerns about the ability of everyone in the community to pay fees. Some were worried that too many fees and/or funding more services through fees would limit access to services and activities for some people in their community.

taxes.[114] Concern about the regressive nature of sales taxes was an issue for some people.[115] Many participants did make the connection between the idea of a local sales tax and the issue of finding a mechanism for non-residents to pay for services they use.[116] There was some concern about whether a sales tax is an appropriate way to fund basic services given the inequality between communities as to what kind of sales tax revenue they could generate.[117]

About half of the people engaged in the conversations around the state said property owners should pay most of the costs of city services because they are the biggest users of those services.[118] Few Minnesotans, however, felt that only home or business owners in a community should pay for the costs of city services there.[119] More than three-quarters of the Minnesotans involved in the conversations supported non-residents paying

---

[114] *Id.* at 17 ("Participants had mixed opinions regarding support for local sales taxes. A temporary tax for a specific project was more acceptable to many than a tax that could support general city services.").

[115] A participant from Duluth, Minnesota articulated the concern: "I don't like [it] – because sales tax in general tends to be more regressive, I feel less comfortable with that for something that's general for the common good kinds of things, I think it's much better used for something that's much more specific."

[116] COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 16 ("People were quick to recognize the demand on city services created by workers, college students, visitors, shoppers, and others. They were less sure about how to collect payment from non-resident users - whether it should involve fees, special taxes, or something else."). For example, if the tax is for a specific project—like a water treatment plant—and is in place for a limited amount of time, people were more positive about the idea. Some participants said they would be supportive of this kind of revenue source if they got to vote on it. People do not like the idea of a local sales tax that a city could use to generate funds to pay for city services in general. Almost half of the participants said they were not in favor of such an approach. They are worried about being able to track where the money goes and about who gets to make decisions regarding how the money is spent. *Id.* at 17.

[117] *Id.*

[118] *Id.*

[119] *Id.* at 16.

something if they benefit from the service.[120] Interestingly, nearly all participants said they think that the state has a financial stake in ensuring services are available in all parts of Minnesota.[121]

D.   Meeting Four: Identifying Important Values and Considerations

During the final conversation in each community, participants shared the values and considerations they want state and local decision makers to think about when making tough choices about the future of cities.[122]

Minnesotans identified hundreds of values and considerations, which were loosely grouped into thirteen categories. There were no significant differences found in responses among the twelve locations. In general, participants suggested that officials consider the differing needs of Minnesotans, paying attention to

---

[120] *Id.* at 17.

[121] COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 17 (showing that 84% of participants supported the state spending money to make sure there are quality services for all, regardless of where they live in the state). Many people said the state's role is to ensure that basic or necessary services are provided everywhere. Minnesotans used examples of poor towns, small towns and struggling areas as reasons why the state's role is important—to help struggling places and to make sure all places thrive. *Id.* at 16.

[122] The exact prompt was "What are the most important considerations to keep in mind in making these tough choices? What values should guide decision-making? What do you want kept in mind as tough choices need to be made?" Participants were asked to write their comments on note cards. *Id.* at 19. Each participant had two to three minutes to come up with a list and was given time to share with the group. Facilitators then posted the cards, asked other group members to vote on their preferences, and then discussed reasons for those votes. *Id.* After the initial round-robin sharing, each group discussed all of the ideas introduced. *Id.* People were asked to clarify their own ideas and to ask questions about the ideas of others in order to build understanding. *Id.* Each participant within the small group was asked to show support for the three most important ideas through a "voting" exercise. COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 19. Facilitators shared the top three ideas from each group with the large group in attendance at the end of the meeting. *Id.*

groups of various ages, abilities, and socio-economic status.[123] Fairness and equity were often mentioned as important to keep in mind.[124] The need for leadership, i.e., for decision-makers to be willing to make the hard choices, was also important for many participants.[125]

Ideas that focused on quality of life or the effect of decisions on the community collectively garnered the most support;[126] "these ideas often mentioned the word 'community' or mentioned things such as safety, well-being, and quality of life."[127] Minnesotans also asked leaders to think about how decisions would affect different types of people and features in the community.[128] The next most supported ideas related to service levels and their availability.[129] Many of these ideas advocated "protection of 'core,' 'essential,' 'basic,' or 'general services.'"[130] These services were often described as those "citizens cannot do without or do for themselves or those that the private sector is unlikely or unable to provide."[131] Several participants suggested prioritizing; one wrote that officials should ask, "Is the service a necessity, wish, or want?"[132]

Ideas relating to what things cost and how to pay for them rounded out the top three groups that received the most support

---

[123] *Id.*

[124] *Id.*

[125] *Id.*

[126] *Id.*

[127] COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 19.

[128] *Id.*

[129] *Id.*

[130] *Id.*

[131] *Id.* Minnesotans wrote that these services, such as water, sewage, fire and police, contribute to the safety and well-being of the community. While some stressed support for these basic services, such that the services should not be changed when making tough decisions, other participants urged officials to look at all city services when facing budgetary constraints.

[132] The quotation from the participant is unattributed to protect his or her anonymity. "While some participants stressed support for these basic services, others urged officials to look at all city services when making tough decisions." *Id.*

from participants.[133] Some advocated for specific methods of generating revenue;[134] others, that leaders should evaluate costs and benefits when making spending decisions.[135] Minnesotans encouraged officials to consider who pays – homeowners, business owners, residents and visitors.[136]

IV.   Important Lessons and the Next Phase of the Cities, Services & Funding Project

While participant comments may not have been surprising, the League learned five important lessons regarding citizen engagement policy.[137] These lessons, which are characteristic of the CSF initiative, should be used by entities wishing to implement a similar project.

A.   Lessons and Characteristics of the CSF Initiative

First, the CSF model is a highly effective educational tool; participants reported learning much about local government.[138]

---

[133] COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 19.

[134] *Id.*

[135] *Id.*

[136] For more information about the results, *see id.*

[137] *See id.* at 23 (describing three of the five lessons. The League also learned that Minnesota citizens care about cities, other Minnesotans, and are receptive to public policy changes regarding cities).

[138] *Id.* at 11, in which participants self-identified their level of knowledge as "a lot":

Topic	Before Community Conversations	After Community Conversations
"Of what services cities typically deliver"	193	334
"Of how cities deliver services"	152	271
"Of how city services are funded"	142	277

Participants were very respectful during the initial presentation and the small group discussions,[139] and in general, the facilitated small-group discussions resulted in participants understanding the positive and negative consequences of policy options available to cities.[140]

Second, the CSF model exemplifies the appropriate way for public officials to engage with citizens. The League noted, "[t]he way we talk about policy options plays a major role in the ability of constituents to comprehend and participate in decision-making process."[141] Part of the CSF project required the League staff to describe the important policy decisions to be made, and in doing so, the League learned how to discuss government and the role of government with citizens in a way that encourages citizen participation in the policy dialogue. "The way information is presented really matters; providing solid, unbiased background information in a way that is accessible and avoids triggering ideology is key to having productive conversations."[142]

Third, the CSF model advances the public policy of citizen engagement by allowing residents to engage meaningfully in public policy discussions. City officials were not part of the discussions

---

"Of what others in my community think about city services"	83	265

Participants were asked to complete a voluntary exit survey, in which they compared their knowledge of various topics before and after their participation.

[139] DON REEDER, OBSERVATIONS RELATED TO THE CSF COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS (2012), on file with author.

[140] *Id.*

[141] *Id.*

[142] COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 22; *see also* DEMOS, BUILDING SUPPORT FOR GOVERNMENT 4 (2010), *available at* http://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/publications/ Talking_about_Government_Summary_of_Findings_2010_05_06.pdf ("When people are caught in an image of government as a large and wasteful bureaucracy, it is difficult to grasp the many concrete and essential activities of government. The systems and structures that make up our government – from our court systems and the post office to the services that support families – are obscured.").

with the residents in the Community Conversations, and this allowed residents to openly express their ideas and participate in policy discussions meaningfully.[143] When conducting pilot runs of the Community Conversations, the presence of city officials had two unproductive effects. Participants either deferred to the expertise or inside knowledge possessed by the officials, discouraging an honest flow of ideas, or questioned the official about specific issues or problems in the community rather than talk about city services and funding, generally, and thereby detract for the purpose of the initiative.[144]

Fourth, the Community Conversations took place at meetings that were already occurring, thereby reaching out to residents interested in civic engagement and accessing those people when it is convenient for them.[145] Meetings were convened by a trusted, known, familiar individual or group,[146] and therefore, working with partner organizations in the individual cities is critical to successfully engaging the public in dialogue.[147]

Fifth, the CSF project is a successful development in the public policy of engaging residents in local government discussions and decisions in that it has led to city's involving residents in ongoing conversations about the city:

Participants were given the option of sharing their name and contact information with their city in order to be considered for future public engagement opportunities and other events specific to the city - almost 300 of the attendees volunteered their information.[148]

---

[143] COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 2 (describing how the details of the publication were the ideas of citizens, and not city officials).

[144] DIALOGUE & DELIBERATION, *supra* note 18, at 8 (The absence of city leaders parallels the advice of the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation: "Unresponsive power-holders deliver one-way pronouncements . . . Patronizing experts and authorities feel they already have all the answers and 'listen' only to appease.").

[145] COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 3, at 22.

[146] *Id.*

[147] *Id.*

[148] *Id.*

More recently, in order to learn about bringing the conversation model to a specific city and incorporating some specific city circumstances into the materials, the League partnered with the city of International Falls.[149]

B.   Expanding the CSF Initiative

The city of International Falls faces funding challenges created by its role in the region as service provider. Many users of city services like the library and the airport come from outside the city limits and therefore do not pay property taxes to the city for those services. Some factual information about International Falls' city services and funding was incorporated into the informational presentation at each of four meetings. Some of the questions posed to participants were changed slightly to tease out opinions and ideas related to International Falls issues. The city has held subsequent meetings and been in communication with the community conversation participants. They have had meetings related to the airport funding issue, and, in general, the city is excited to have a core group—albeit small - of residents who are well informed and engaged.

V.   Conclusion

Citizen engagement efforts are used to generate solutions to a particular problem. The CSF project was different. The project was used to generate a gamut of input that could be used when cities develop public policy options. CSF is a replicable citizen participation model that should be used to address the concerns of individual cities, develop statewide policies for municipalities, and generally increase citizen participation in local government. Recently, the League of California Cities announced it would

---

[149] *CSF Community Conversations*, *supra* note 58. In addition to the International Falls pilot, the League is in the early stages of planning a series of conversations in the city of Plymouth, with the hope that the League can design and program city-specific conversations for its members in the future. *Id.*

provide a service to its city members, and it seems to share many of the same characteristics of the CSF initiative.[150] Having determined the important characteristics of a citizen engagement project,[151] the CSF initiative will and should be a model for other similar efforts to develop public policy.

---

[150] Jessica Reynolds, *League to Launch a New Communications and Outreach Assistance Program*, WESTERN CITY, Sept. 2012, *available at* http://www.westerncity.com/Western-City/September-2012/League-to-Launch-a-New-Communications-and-Outreach-Assistance-Program/ ("This program is specifically designed to help cities regularly communicate with residents to educate and inform them about municipal affairs and local and statewide issues. . . . The League's assistance program includes specific communications strategies, samples and templates, and guidelines on how to customize local messages and identify key priorities.").

[151] *See supra* text accompanying notes 137-149.