



CITY OF FAYETTEVILLE  
CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE SCAN

and

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR  
IMPROVING PUBLIC MEETINGS AND  
ENGAGEMENT IN THE CITY

2024



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## Executive Summary

Over the last six months, the Center for Democracy Innovation at the National Civic League has been working to help Fayetteville leaders take stock of the local civic context and consider options for improving public meetings in the context of advisory boards and commissions.

To accomplish these goals, we have conducted a **Civic Infrastructure Scan** to explore the recent history of engagement, assets and capacities present in the community, demographic shifts, and the state of democracy in civic associations and digital networks. We are providing a **set of recommendations** on strategies and tools to use before, during, and after official public meetings.

### Common Themes

From the Scan and conversations with Fayetteville officials, community and staff, three common themes emerged for Fayetteville Next and the Community Police Advisory Board:

- Public outreach and participation is particularly difficult in a transient community.
- Residents want to feel (and be) heard.
- People are unclear about how the policymaking process works and how both CPAB and FN fit into the process.

### Recommendations

For CPAB:

1. Create a clear throughline of how listening sessions, survey responses, and post-board meeting forums inform CPAB's recommendations to City Council and the police department.
2. Use a texting-enabled engagement process to foster listening, deliberation, and idea-gathering on safety issues.
3. Hold regular CPAB meetings in different parts of the city and include a small-group discussion process including residents at the beginning of the meeting.

For Fayetteville Next:

4. Identify a local policy issue/question that is being considered by City Council, and is of interest to young adults in Fayetteville, and gather input on that issue and share a report on the topic with the city council at a public meeting.
5. Use a live-polling tool or a texting-enabled process at FN events to foster discussion and gather feedback to help develop more targeted programs.
6. Hold a FN event at city hall.

For both CPAB and FN:

7. Use the Engagement Scorecard to track resident attitudes about meetings and the community.
8. Host educational sessions on how local government works, and how government and residents can collaborate more effectively.

## Introduction

In many places, official public meetings are fraught with frustration, conflict, and mistrust. By “official public meetings,” we mean meetings that are open to the public, where elected or appointed officials are present, and where policy decisions are being made. The legal structure and operational design of these meetings is largely a vestige of decades past and have not really changed over time. Often, the main opportunity for the public to participate is limited to ‘public comment’ in front of a microphone. This often ends up being a contentious and cathartic, rather than collaborative and deliberative, exercise between elected officials and the public.

Some of the enduring challenges that official public meetings experience include poor attendance and tensions between community members, officials, and staff. The mixture of limited attendance and volatile public settings impacts the quality of discourse and safety for those present in the room, and this tends to affect the community more broadly.

There is evidence to suggest that bad public meetings are damaging because they:

- Lower public trust and confidence in government, making it harder to implement policies and maintain financial stability.
- Increase frustration and stress for public officials and staff.
- This leads to delays and erratic decision-making, which further erodes trust and wastes public funds.
- Worsen inequities because meeting participants are not representative of the communities most affected by policies.

In fact, we have heard several reasons why talking at a microphone tends to leave the public dissatisfied across the three Better Public Meetings communities:

- 1) The limited time to speak.
- 2) Depending on the context, if there are large numbers of people in the queue, not everyone might get a chance to speak.
- 3) The lack of elected official acknowledgment and discussion after speaking.
- 4) The limited awareness of how input gets factored into decision-making.
- 5) The significant rise in contentious and unsafe environments where people thread a thin line between freedom of speech and aggressive, [hateful](#), or unruly behavior.

Our team works with the idea, backed up by a vast body of research, that democratic innovations are a vital way to address these problems. Stephen Elstub and Oliver Escobar define [democratic innovations](#) as “processes or institutions that are new to a policy issue, policy role, or level of governance, and developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence”.

Democratic innovations tend to involve some form of agenda-setting, learning, informed conversation, and recommendations and actions. This combination is what people in the democracy innovation space refer to as a good ‘deliberative’ process. When there is intentional design for public learning and conversation, it often has some form of impact on people’s internal disposition because norms for engagement are commonly agreed upon generating mutual respect, the trust for a process increases

because it is designed for thoughtful two-way communication on a specific issue, and/or policy outcomes arise in some way from a more considered participatory exercise.

The goal then is to create structured spaces and opportunities for collaboration and embody the true spirit of public participation by injecting some democratic innovation to transform the relationships between and across community members and local leaders.

A wealth of practical work in the field of democracy innovation suggests that better public meetings are possible, sustainable, and measurable:

- There are proven tools and practices that can ensure civil, productive dialogue among people who have different backgrounds and interests.
- These practices can be adopted as part of official public meetings, in full accordance with open meetings laws.
- Before and after public meetings, supplementary tools and practices can reach broader audiences: providing information, gathering input, and reporting on decisions.
- Public satisfaction with public meetings, and the state of local democracy generally, can be measured through digital tools.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to how communities can make their meetings more inclined to civil productive dialogue because each community is different based on historical relationships, political dynamics, and legally binding requirements. However, we do feel that there are ways to make the atmosphere of official meetings both supportive of the public and the work that government or public sector staff need to do.

Understanding the local context is critical. Local leaders should take stock of the history, social capital, and civic assets of their communities to strengthen meetings and the relationship between government and citizens. [The Center for Democracy Innovation](#) at the [National Civic League](#) is leading a 'Democracy Innovations for Better Public Meetings project,' with support from the [AAA-ICDR Foundation](#). The project has also benefited from our collaborations with::

- International City/County Management Association
- National League of Cities
- Bloomberg Center for Public Innovation
- Participedia
- Kettering Foundation
- Cities Fortifying Democracy
- Democracy Cities

We are working with [three pilot communities](#) to advance collaborative, best practices in official public meetings:

- City Council of Boulder, Colorado
- Fayetteville Next Commission and Community Police Advisory Board in Fayetteville, North Carolina
- Mesa Public Schools Governing Board in Mesa, Arizona

In this work we are building on best practices in the democratic innovation field and drawing upon local democratic assets and actors, such as city officials (elected/appointed), non-profit organizations and networks, government departments and their staff, anchor institutions (libraries, universities etc.), neighborhood groups, and engaged residents.

### What's in this document?

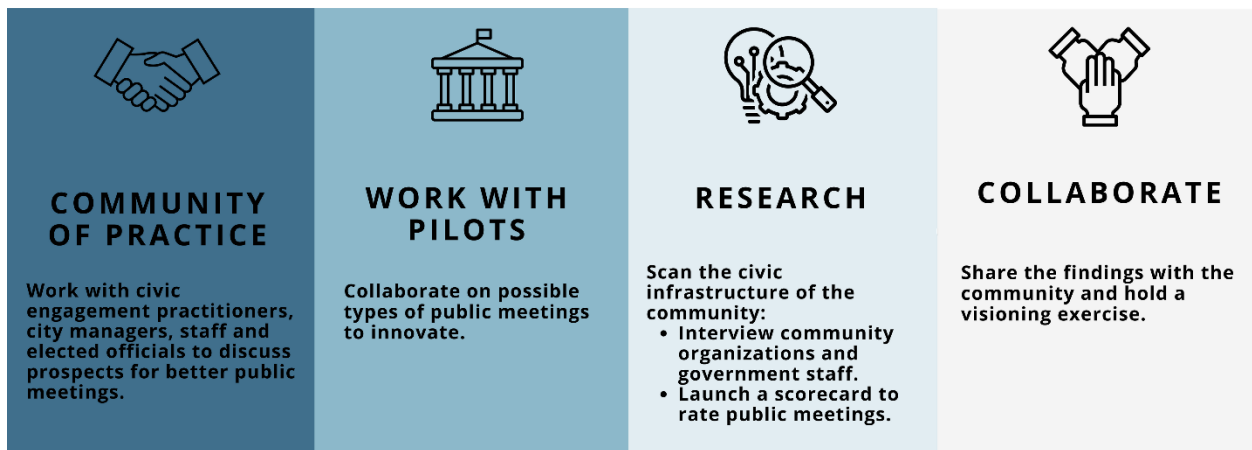
This document contains four sections: our research methodology, community highlights (various types of local civic/social capital and any challenges the community faces), themes based largely on our interviews and our Center for Democracy Innovation's recommendations for Fayetteville, North Carolina.

## Methodology

The project involves several stages of collaboration in the community.

# Democracy Innovations for Better Public Meetings project

Process and timeline



The Fayetteville Civic Infrastructure Scan is a community-engaged research report about the state of local democracy and community connections, particularly as they relate to the Community Police Advisory Board and the Fayetteville Next Commission. The information we present ***is not meant to be an exhaustive examination of local civic engagement and connections, and it is not an academic study.***

This report is a form of strategic research meant to provide ***a snapshot*** of some important elements of civic life in Fayetteville, including challenges and opportunities for improving the quality of experiences in the Community Police Advisory Board and Fayetteville Next Commission meetings, and the community more broadly.

The research was conducted over the course of 6 months (winter 2023 to spring 2024). The project consists of qualitative interviews with local stakeholders. The interviews included a broad array of internal and external actors, some of which had critical thoughts about board and commission meetings,

allowing the Center for Democracy Innovation team to gather a well-rounded, third-party perspective of some of the nuanced challenges facing these boards.

Below is an outline of our research approach:

- Nine semi-structured individual and group interviews with a total of 17 Fayetteville City Staff, Community Organization representatives, residents, local media representatives and academia
- Desk research (open meeting laws, rules of procedure, city charter, CPAB and Fayetteville Next meeting documents) media and extensive review of city publications.

## Community Highlights and Observations

Our work in Fayetteville focused on two bodies: the Community Police Advisory Board (CPAB) and the Fayetteville Next (FN) advisory commission.

The CPAB was formed in 2021 in order to “review and recommend improvements to the policy and practices of the police department to the City Council, City Manager and Police Chief on an ongoing basis and to serve as a liaison between the police department and the community.” It is composed of nine members appointed by the city council.

FN was established in 2019 to “attract, retain, and engage Fayetteville residents between the ages of 19 and 39. The Commission is dedicated to improving the quality of life for young adults through targeted event programming and community outreach initiatives, making Fayetteville a ‘desirable place to live, work and recreate’ for this generation.”

In interviews with community members, we heard about struggles both groups have had with transitions within the membership as well as the transient nature of the Fayetteville community as a whole. But we also heard a sense of pride from those who have maintained deep roots in the community, and who have continued to build their careers and livelihoods in the city.

CPAB has operated as a traditional commission, with regular monthly meetings that members of the public are welcome to attend. The very low attendance at these meetings remains one of, if not, the most important issues. Some interviewees blamed the low turnout on the “broad lack of awareness that CPAB exists.”

CPAB organizes several activities to engage people outside the meetings: Listening sessions where CPAB members visit neighborhoods to talk with community members, a public survey of police, and a “monthly forum” after each CPAB meeting. They also recently held a Community Safety Office Summit.

It seems likely that CPAB members are limiting the appeal of attendance by reminding the community of its advisory nature. CPAB has a very clear charter, but there is some division and confusion about what role the board should serve. Other interviewees pointed out that CPAB is not committing to having public input directly inform how the board presents ideas for discussion at council meetings.

FN utilizes social engagements and informal settings to bring young adults (age 19-39) together and begin to build community within this generation. They organized a recent employment/jobs summit, showing a renewed focus on programming that addresses community needs and interests.

FN has been able to reach a much larger audience than CPAB, but interviewees weren't sure how that participation was having an impact (if at all) on public decision-making. Some interviewees who are more familiar with the policymaking process seemed to discount FN because it approaches engagement in a non-traditional fashion, with parties and events that seemed social and fun but not serious and relevant to public issues.

FN members generally expressed enthusiasm for their role and responsibilities, but identified some areas of interest for their future capacity building:

- Build on their interest to understand and establish new relationships within the city and region's governmental structures to better inform their focus and interest areas.
- Gain more knowledge of civic and governmental systems and processes of interest.
- Create regular survey panels of participants in their social events to inform and enhance their strategic planning, budget projections and annual reporting to City Council.

"FN was established to help strengthen the community, yes, but also give a long-term focus on economic stability and keeping people here at 'home,'" said one interviewee. "We want young people to feel connected to this community for the long haul."

**Potential partners – Groups that emerged in the interviews that CPAB and FN could work with more extensively to engage residents**

- **CityView – local media**
- **Cumberland Health Net**
- **Neighborhood/Community Watch**
- **Radio station**
- **Barbershops**
- **Hospitals**
- **Churches**
- **HCBUs (student groups)**
- **Diverse neighborhood groups**
- **Fayetteville Urban Ministry**
- **Community outreach paramedic team**
- **Group Theory, a local nonprofit serving needs of young people**
- **The Community Navigators program run by Cumberland County**



## Scan Themes

### Theme 1: Public outreach and participation is particularly difficult in a transient community

The presence in Fayetteville of one of the world's largest military installations has shaped the character of the community in unique ways, none more so than the fact that the community tends to be more transient given the nature of military service and assignments.

The shorter-term nature of residency impacts the institutional knowledge of the city and the community, and this creates challenges for some city programs and services. Residents need to do a lot of learning or relearning in order to engage, and staff need to constantly learn and relearn in order to adapt to new community members. This impacts attendance at public meetings, recruitment and engagement of volunteers in city programs, and membership on boards and commissions.

### Theme 2: Residents want to feel (and be) heard

As in most communities, Fayetteville residents want their input to be taken into consideration in public decision-making. When they don't know how to have their voices heard, or don't believe they will be heard, people generally won't participate at all.

The lack of clarity (on the part of the public) about the role of CPAB, and the lack of awareness of how participating in FN events may affect decision-making, may be limiting whether and how people engage with both groups.

### Theme 3: People are unclear about how the policymaking process works and how both CPAB and FN fit into the process

In most communities, many residents are unfamiliar with typical local government systems like city manager/city council structures and local land use permitting. In a more transient community, and with relatively new government entities like CPAB and FN, this challenge becomes more difficult.

We heard from one interviewee that "we spend a lot of our time just trying to understand how the city works and we could use some help in being more informed about how to get more attention to our issues."

## Center for Democracy Innovation Recommendations

Based on our research in Fayetteville and our experiences with other cities, we have a number of recommendations to suggest.

For CPAB:

1. Create a clear throughline of how listening sessions, survey responses, and post-board meeting forums inform CPAB’s recommendations to City Council and the police department.

CPAB to its credit has created a variety of different tools to engage the public but it remains unclear how these tools and activities directly informs the recommendations. One way to clarify expectations is by using the [IAP2 Spectrum](#) (see chart below).



developed by the international association for public participation

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
<b>PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL</b>	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decision.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.
<b>PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC</b>	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

	Police survey	Deliberative sessions at meetings		
	Listening sessions	Texting-enabled engagement		
	Monthly forums			

2. Use a texting-enabled engagement process to foster listening, deliberation, and idea-gathering on safety issues.

The CPAB's work would be complemented by, and benefit from, hybrid (meaning digital and in-person) engagement opportunities that were more interactive and built a stronger ongoing relationship between decision-makers and community members. One strategy would be to use texting-enabled engagement to encourage, facilitate, and aggregate small face-to-face conversations happening wherever and whenever is convenient for residents (for example, at barbershops).

- Deliberative discussions in groups of 2-4 people are effective for helping people learn about issues, consider their options, and decide together what they want to do. Digital texting platforms can structure and connect those discussions, allowing large numbers of people to contribute ideas, find information, answer questions, and engage in a statewide or national process. The potential of this format has been demonstrated by "[Text, Talk, Act](#)," which over the last eight years has involved over 200,000 Americans in productive deliberation on mental health issues.
  - Participating in a texting-enabled process is simple. Whenever and wherever they want, participants text a keyword (like "master plan") to a pre-assigned number and then receive a series of text messages, including:
    - information on the topic (sometimes in the form of links to videos);
    - questions for discussion (if you are in a group of 2-4) or reflection (if you are on your own);
    - process suggestions;
    - polling questions; and
    - requests to respond with action ideas and commitments they will make.
  - Each text the participant receives includes a keyword to use in their response in order to get the next text from the platform.
  - Throughout the process, participants also receive links that allow them to see how other people participating in the process have responded to the polling and action questions.
  - In addition to helping people make better decisions, a texting-enabled process can provide city officials and staff with a sampling of public opinion. Though not as scientific as a random-sample poll, an SMS-based engagement strategy builds in information and deliberation, so that participant responses are more informed and considered.
  - This process could be used to structure the small-group discussions at listening sessions and forums held by CPAB, making human facilitation easier (or even superfluous). It also provides CPAB members and other leaders an easy way to bring city topics and decisions into other community meetings.
3. Hold regular CPAB meetings in different parts of the city and include a small-group discussion process including residents at the beginning of the meeting.

Local non-profits and other groups, such as Urban Ministry, have offered their space up to host events in the community. CPAB can work with these organizations to establish an outreach strategy catered to a local organization's catchment area and the people they serve.

To increase interaction and deliberation, CPAB can use a texting-enabled process (like the one described above) or a basic small-group discussion format:

- Participants are sorted randomly into groups of 4-8 as they arrive
- CPAB members and city staff join groups as well
- Topics are determined beforehand, and included in all descriptions/promotion of the meeting
- Each group has a facilitator, trained beforehand, whose job is to:
  - Help group set ground rules
  - Ensure that everyone has a chance to speak
  - Help manage the time
  - Introduce any discussion questions that have been provided
  - Help the group decide who will report out from their conversation OR help the group use the digital reporting process (see below)
- Results of the small groups are shared, and entered in the public record, in one of two ways:
  - Reporter from each group summarizes the discussion OR
  - Participants give their comments/answers via live polling, and results are displayed on a big screen
  - As part of the live polling or through a question on the Engagement Scorecard, participants vote on which potential future agenda items should be prioritized/recommended for the council

For Fayetteville Next:

4. Identify a local policy issue/question that is being considered by City Council, and is of interest to young adults in Fayetteville, and gather input on that issue and share a report on the topic with the city council at a public meeting.

This could become a regular practice of FN – on a semi-annual or quarterly basis – as a way to heighten awareness of the work and focus of the commission.

The recent jobs/workforce summit could provide one opportunity: FN could release a report on who attended the summit and some of the issues/concerns that surfaced at the event, and add questions for discussion and some potential recommendations from FN on how to address the issues.

5. Use a live-polling tool or a texting-enabled process at FN events to foster discussion and gather feedback to help develop more targeted programs.

FN could use Mentimeter, as an example, to gather input and ideas from the crowd in real time at an event. The input received could be shared with participants and with the Fayetteville City Council and others.

The texting-enabled process described above is another way to foster deliberation and gather data at events.

6. Hold a FN event at city hall.

Consider this as an opportunity to engage community in their connection to local government offices and services. This could also be an opportunity for city staff to introduce themselves to the community – heads of departments and sharing of information about their roles or key issues that they oversee.

For both CPAB and FN:

7. Use the Engagement Scorecard to track resident attitudes about meetings and the community.

The Center’s Scorecard tool can be used to help track how participants react to the innovations described above. It also asks people questions about their community, providing a stream of data about civility, equity, and participation.

The Scorecard can also be adapted to allow people to respond more specifically to certain issues or at particular events (version pictured below is in use by the City of Boulder, CO).

8. Host educational sessions on how local government works, and how government and residents can collaborate more effectively.

Trainings and workshops can help citizens better understand and build capacity for working with city staff and elected officials – and can help officials and staff better understand how to work with citizens.

Another form this might take is an annual City-hosted open house event for boards and commission members to provide update on the status of current initiatives and projects. This approach can help keep board and commission members informed and aligned with local issues and city’s organizational priorities.



## Conclusion and Next Steps

The Center for Democracy Innovation presented an overview of the findings and recommendations to the Community Police Advisory Board at its' April 17 meeting and to the Fayetteville Next Commission at its' May 16 meeting. Our time was limited to approximately 15 minutes on the agenda at both

meetings. In brief discussions with both bodies, we extended our offer to provide additional information and follow up on any of the recommendations.

While we would have welcomed the opportunity to present our full report and recommendations to the City Manager and Fayetteville City Council at an in-person session, it was not possible to schedule this within this project's timeframe. However, we would welcome the opportunity in the future to share the findings and discuss recommendations with the City Council and the local community.

We hope that the CPAB and FN will contact us when they would like our assistance with any of the recommendations they wish to pursue. We appreciate the community's interest and involvement in this project and look forward to future conversations.