One of Florida’s great challenges is its weak civic life. By “civic” we refer to the many ways that citizens participate and that institutions work together in improving community life including, voting, volunteering and public, private and non-profit sector community initiatives from problem-solving to planning. Recent studies rate Florida near last in civic health among 50 states. Florida is 32nd in voter turnout, 44th in philanthropy, and 47th in people volunteering and attending public meetings. It also has one of the lowest rates of non-profit groups per capita. Among the 50 largest U.S. cities, Miami ranks last, Orlando is 48th, and Jacksonville and Tampa are tied at 47th in terms of civic health. The future is not bright either. A 2011 study of Florida youth 18 to 29 found them to be, “the most civically disengaged group in one of the most civically disengaged states.” A key question for Florida’s leaders is: have we done enough to improve civic life in Florida’s communities and can we do more and do it better?

Florida’s weak civic life breeds political and social unrest. It also weakens economic potential in communities. The Florida Chamber Foundation hit the nail on the head in saying: “Citizens engaged in their communities are vital, not just because engagement fosters trust in public institutions and legitimacy in public processes, but also because it is correlated to a strong educational system, a competitive workforce, and a dynamic economy.” There is a growing consensus that civic improvement is both an economic development issue and a quality of life factor in the future of Florida’s communities.

Despite poor civic ratings, there are many examples of solid progress, excellence, and innovation in civic life in the Sunshine State. For example, thanks to the leadership of former U.S. Senator and Governor Bob Graham and Congressman Lou Frey, and other leaders, the Florida Legislature has passed strong legislation to improve civic education in secondary schools. Florida colleges and universities now have service learning requirements and civic leadership programs. There are many professional associations promoting civic engagement and civility; and 10 Florida cities have been recognized as “All America Cities,” in part, because of their civic strength. Beyond these positive indicators, there are numerous examples of outstanding civic work throughout Florida such as the Knight Foundation’s “Soul of the Community” initiatives.

The Florida Civic Advance (FCA) is a new project to support civic progress in Florida. It builds upon Florida’s strengths and envisions Florida as a world-class leader in civic innovation rather than a laggard in civic health. The FCA goals are: 1) To develop ideas on how to best communicate and collaborate around civic challenges in Florida’s communities; 2) To develop strategies, models, and tools for helping local communities improve civic performance, capacity and life; 3) To develop ideas and tools for ways to address and find solutions to particular civic challenges; and 4) To identify priority areas for ongoing civic research and support ways to have it done.

The bottom-line of the FCA is to improve civic life in Florida communities. The project promotes the development and use of metrics to help communities gauge civic health and guide progress in areas such as
voting, volunteering, philanthropy, helping neighbors and civic and community engagement. It encourages community planning to develop a shared vision of success, address critical problems, and build civic leadership capacity. It also promotes greater civility, inter-generational connections, inclusion of new citizens, thoughtful public dialogue and practices that reduce conflict and facilitate consensus.

Multi-sector collaboration is the driving principle behind the Florida Civic Advance. The project’s supporters believe it is only by working together at the state and local levels that systemic and long-term civic improvement can be achieved in Florida’s communities. The Florida Civic Advance is a collaborative initiative among many Florida organizations committed to strengthening civic life. Those involved to date are:

**THE FLORIDA CIVIC ADVANCE**

We anticipate that this list of organizations in Florida committed to improving civic life will expand in the coming months. The FCRC Florida Consensus Center is the project convener and administrator. The Center, located at Florida State University, was founded over 25 years ago by the Florida Legislature to help facilitate the search for shared solutions to challenges faced at the community, regional and state level through collaboration. It has conducted over 500 projects that have helped communities and agencies achieve consensus and improve collaboration on key issues.

An inaugural Florida Civic Advance Network Summit is being planned for February 22-23, 2015 in Orlando. In the longer term, the project aims to undertake demonstration projects among partners, promote research on civic life and practices, report about civic best practices and innovation, and offer assistance to local communities.

To participate in, support, or find out more information about the Florida Civic Advance, contact Robert Jones at the FCRC Consensus Center at FSU (rmjones@fsu.edu or at 850-644-6320). Also visit: [http://consensus.fsu.edu/Civic-Advance/index.html](http://consensus.fsu.edu/Civic-Advance/index.html). Potential sponsors can find more information at: [http://consensus.fsu.edu/Civic-Advance/sponsorship.html](http://consensus.fsu.edu/Civic-Advance/sponsorship.html).