ENGAGING CITIZENS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT: FLORIDA’S CHALLENGE BRIEFING PAPER

FCA Workgroup Draft Briefing Paper, October 2017

I. INTRODUCTION

Citizen participation is a cornerstone of democracy in America. Among the important ways in which citizens participate are: voting, the most basic right and responsibility of every citizen; engaging with government to help establish good policies and to solve public problems; and volunteering to help one’s community and those in need. These are time-honored values of citizenship taught in our schools and recognized throughout the nation.

This paper is concerned with one area of citizen participation citizen engagement sponsored by government, especially as it relates to the 412 municipalities and 67 counties in the state of Florida. As will be discussed, this is an area in which there are meaningful opportunities for expansion and improvement by local governments. This briefing paper has been prepared with the assistance of a Workgroup of the Florida Civic Advance1, an initiative to strengthen civic life in Florida. Its primary purpose is to help to guide discussion and seek input and ideas on this topic at the Florida Civic Advance Summit in Orlando on November 6 and 7, 2017 and to produce a framework paper in early 2018.

II. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Since the 1950’s, the need for citizen engagement has increased with the growth of our nation. As the United States has evolved into a complex, technological, and predominantly urban society, policy challenges

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have grown exponentially regarding such matters as education, environmental protection, economic development, transportation, housing, and public health, among many issues. Consequently, elected and appointed officials, at all levels of government, have sought and established ways, beyond voting, to seek public input and support in establishing effective policies and solving problems.

Citizen engagement in government is undertaken for multiple reasons and in various ways. Among the purposes are: to share, gather and improve the quality of information; to identify issues of concern; to guide the development of plans and the improvement of programs; to provide input for the allocation of resources; and to establish, discontinue, or improve a policy, law, regulation, practice, or service. There are scores of ways in which governments seek to engage citizens. The most common include: public comment periods at meetings of elected officials; citizen advisory committees; workshops; website, social media, and app comment functions; and citizen surveys. In recent years, considerable interest has been shown in the adaptation of new technologies and new facilitative practices as ways to inform and engage citizens.

Activities that engage citizens with government range from helpful to hurtful. At best, they can result in attracting new information, critical thinking, and creative options to address community needs with a corresponding increase in communication, understanding, respect, support, and trust among the public and with public officials. At worst, they can become divisive, even polarizing, fostering misinformation; and misunderstanding while undermining mutual trust and respect. The goal of all local governments, and the hope of all citizens, should be to achieve the former and avoid the later.

III. FLORIDA’S CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT CHALLENGE

Extensive research indicates that Florida lags behind most states when it comes to matters of civic health generally, and citizen engagement with government particularly. For example, the Sunshine State ranks 36th among the 50 states in voter turnout, 47th in terms of citizens attending public meeting, and 50th in citizens working with neighbors to fix a community problem.

There are two significant factors that illuminate Florida’s civic challenges. First, Florida's population has grown at a record pace of 470% between 1950 and 2000. An important feature of this growth is that a majority of Florida citizens, approximately 65%, were not born in Florida. Consequently, most have weak ties to Florida communities and institutions, and their civic attention and allegiance is often to or split with their native communities, states or nations. Second, no other state’s population is as old, multicultural, multiracial, migratory, transitory, or foreign born as Florida. Over 17% of Floridians are 65 and older (the highest state rate in the U.S.); 23% are of Hispanic origin, nearly 17% are African American; and over 19% are foreign born.

While population growth and diversity make citizen engagement more difficult in Florida, these forces also have positive influences. For example, many new Floridians may be less tied to specific traditions and more willing to try new and different ways of doing things. Further, because Floridians come from so many different places and backgrounds, they provide multiple perspectives in experience, thinking, communicating, and solving problems. So, despite poor civic health rankings, it is not surprising to find considerable innovation and a wide variety of civic engagement activities throughout Florida, and in different kinds of communities.

Today, Florida municipalities and counties face two practical challenges in dealing with citizen engagement. The first is to assure that their communities have, are building, or are maintaining a civic infrastructure to deal with the forces of growth change, and diversity. By civic infrastructure we mean community institutions
and practices that promote appreciation, civic values, communication, cooperation, deliberation, leadership development, mediation, and mutual assistance among all elements of the community. This implies appropriate and strategic efforts by government officials and agencies to partner with and support efforts by the private and non-profit sectors to nurture a community’s civic culture. The second challenge is more direct, and involves activities to engage citizens to help local officials to develop and implement plans and policies to address public problems. We suggest that these two types of activities have a reinforcing effect, and we encourage local public officials to seek excellence and innovation in advancing each in order make local government more effective and to advance and protect the quality of life for all citizens.

IV. A VISION OF SUCCESS- ENGAGED CITIZENS PURSUING THE COMMON GOOD IN THEIR COMMUNITIES

Despite Florida’s poor civic rankings, many cities and counties are effective in engaging citizens, and innovative efforts are widespread throughout the state. The Florida Civic Advance, a network of 45 organizations committed to strengthening civic life in Florida, encourages sharing information about these activities, the adoption of proven principles, greater research about citizen engagement by Florida universities, and a number of shared activities to help advance citizen engagement in Florida communities throughout the state.

Our vision for the future of Florida concerning citizen engagement is:

Local governments provide citizens with clear, thorough, and timely information, through multiple formats, about important policy decisions that need to be made or actions that need to be taken to advance community interests. Local government agencies provide basic opportunities for citizen engagement through such practices as public comment periods at meetings of elected officials; citizen advisory committees; workshops; website, social media, and app comment functions; citizen surveys and citizen visioning initiatives. In addition, local government agencies work with universities and nonprofit organizations to better inform and engage citizens. Public officials are successful in engaging all elements of their communities initially and throughout the policy making process. Statewide programs of information, research, and assistance provide local officials with relevant information, tools and continuing education that help them to be successful in engaging citizens and in strengthening the civic infrastructure of their communities. As a result, a majority of citizens’ trust their local government. Florida exceeds the national average in measures of citizen engagement, and the state is recognized as a world-class leader for innovation in engaging citizens.

V. EMPLOY PROVEN PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

While every city and county is unique in terms of its civic culture and capacity to engage citizens, there are a number of principles that have proven to be effective in developing citizen engagement in different types of communities over time. We suggest the following as examples of principles that are relevant to the civic challenges faced in Florida communities today.

1. GOVERNMENTS CONTINUOUSLY ENGAGE CITIZENS THROUGH BOTH FORMAL AND INFORMAL CHANNELS.
   Public officials need continued informal and formal contacts with citizens and organizations from all segments of the community to establish ongoing communication and trust. In this regard, good relationships augment good methods in addressing community needs and policy changes. In many
communities, it may be wise for the city or county to partner with community leaders to empower community groups and to work together to strengthen their civic infrastructure. Such effort can lead to more manageable and successful citizen engagement, greater trust, more effective government performance, better quality of life, and increased civic pride.

2. **SUCCESSFUL CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT BEGINS WITH GOOD INFORMATION.**
Citizens need to have information that is current, thorough, and accurate in order to participate constructively and creatively. By today’s standards, this implies a good and user-friendly website, plus communication strategies that distributes information to all segments of the community through a variety of media.

3. **EVERYONE IS RESPONSIBLE BUT SOMEONE IS IN CHARGE.**
Every elected official and public employee accepts responsibility for helping to communicate and foster citizen engagement with regard to their areas of responsibility. This calls for providing all officials with basic and ongoing training in how to effectively work with the public. At the same time, an individual or group needs to be assigned oversight for continued planning, oversight, coordination, evaluation, and improvement of citizen engagement.

4. **METRICS NEEDED TO GUIDE PROGRESS ARE TAILORED TO THE RESOURCES OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT.**
Investments in citizen engagement are unlikely to be sustained unless they result in improved government performance and public support. This requires clarifying areas of priority concern. It also requires careful planning and implementation methods for assessing civic engagement and satisfaction, methods compatible with the character of the community and manageable with the local government’s resources.

5. **INCORPORATE THREE KEY PRACTICES: CLARIFICATION, ENGAGEMENT THROUGHOUT & OUTREACH.**
Successful citizen engagement consistently includes:
   a. **CLARIFICATION** - What is the community need? What purpose will civic engagement fulfill? Who has what role in developing and implementing the process? What results are sought? What is the time frame?
   b. **ENGAGEMENT THROUGHOUT** – Citizens are drawn into the process on the front end, helping to frame the issues, develop options, and assess their value, until the process is completed.
   c. **OUTREACH** – Continuous efforts to identify segments of the population that are not adequately represented and to bring them into the conversation.

VI. **WHAT WE NEED TO LEARN: 10 KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS FOR ENGAGING CITIZENS**

If Florida is to improve in terms of its civic health, it is necessary to learn as much as possible from successful and unsuccessful experience in communities of different sizes, types, and locations throughout the state. To this end, we invite Florida colleges and universities to encourage their faculties and students to seek out opportunities to conduct research on civic life in Florida, and particularly within cities, counties, and regions.

In regards to citizen engagement with government, we suggest that the following 10 questions be given strong attention because of their practical significance and their relevance to Florida’s unique civic challenges:

1. What government characteristics tend to correlate with higher levels of civic engagement and why?
2. What demographic features tend to correlate with higher levels of civic engagement, and why? Does this vary by traits of the government? Traits of the community? Policy area?

3. What citizen engagement methods and strategies have been most and least effective in communities of different types and size, and in regard to different policy issues?

4. What information sources are most influential with different groups of Florida voters and why are they influential? What role do official information sources play, How might official sources enhance their influence?

5. What causes different groups of citizens to have high or low levels of satisfaction or trust in local government? To what extent, and in what ways, does citizen engagement influence trust in or satisfaction with government?

6. To what extent and in what ways do citizens who volunteer through government agencies influence public policy and practices? How does their influence differ from citizens who are policy advocates but do not volunteer?

7. What are the best examples of successful methods to engage different groups of citizens in local government policy-making in Florida, and what can we learn from these examples?

8. What factors motivate or constrain citizen engagement among different groups of citizens including such things as self-interest, sense of duty, desire for socialization, curiosity, desire for social change, etc.

9. What factors motivate or constrain interest and efforts by public officials in different roles to encourage, utilize, and value citizen engagement?

10. What incentives are successful in encouraging citizens to participate and to encourage public officials to initiate and use citizen engagement practices?

VII. WHAT CAN WE DO TOGETHER TO STRENGTHEN CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN FLORIDA?

“Ideas won’t keep. Something has to be done about them.” —Alfred North Whitehead

Building upon efforts to increase research about citizen engagement in Florida, we propose three strategies to increase and improve citizen engagement with government in local communities. These approaches are inter-related, long-term, and will require collaboration among a number of organizations that are dedicated to helping municipal and county governments in Florida. The proposals are consistent with the strategic vision of the Florida Civic Advance, they will depend upon strong cooperation among FCA member organization and they will require new resources to sustain meaningful collective impact. The strategies we propose are as follows:

A. **Establish a Florida Civic Information Network:** This will make it possible to identify, analyze, and share information about the most exemplary and innovative activities in many areas of civic life in Florida with a particularly strong focus on citizen engagement in local government. A website will
be needed to report on outstanding activities and programs, in-depth case studies, leader interviews, research summaries, and other information participants may want. Additional avenues for sharing information over time include: print media, radio and television, social media, and the websites and events of relevant organizations. Because the Florida Civic Advance is a very large network, there are many member groups that are able and willing to participate in the advancement of this strategy.

B. Develop Citizen Engagement Instructional Materials: Local government officials who are interested in increasing and improving citizen engagement will need a variety of tools to help them including evaluative check-lists, planning guides, and examples of successful methods and procedures in print and video formats. We recommend a survey of municipal and county officials to identify areas and topics of greatest need and interest to assure that materials are relevant and responsive. In addition to selecting relevant material that is currently available, it is likely that additional materials will be needed that address some of the unique citizen engagement challenges in Florida. These materials could be accessed through the Florida Civic Information Network proposed above and the Citizen Engagement Leadership Program proposed below.

C. Provide a Citizen Engagement Leadership Program: Beyond making materials available, it is proposed that a series of leadership training seminars about citizen engagement be offered at various sites throughout Florida and in relation to meetings of government associations. Since some programs already exist, on a modest scale, it is recommended that they serve as a nucleus for expansion, and that interested organizations collaborate in the development of the leadership program. Examples, lessons, and leaders identified through the proposed Civic Information Network, and the recommended initiative to develop Citizen Engagement Instructional Materials, could help to provide depth, relevance, and resources to this program.

Any comments or suggestions on this paper or interest in actions to enhance citizen engagement with local government going forward can contact Bob Jones, Secretariat, Florida Civic Advance at rmjones@fsu.edu