A significant challenge in our democracy is how to give citizens real voice on issues that matter. Most decision-makers recognize the value that informed input from citizens can offer critical policy and planning decisions, but find neither the time nor the tools to obtain input from citizens in ways that are fair, balanced, timely, and, ultimately, influential.

There are excellent examples of leaders at every level of government who are engaging citizens in an equitable and balanced way that both meets their timetables and results in decisions that are significantly influenced by what citizens have recommended.

What are the conditions under which projects like these succeed? The conditions are many – vigorous citizen activism, forward-thinking leadership, low tolerance for slow or stalled progress on an important issue, and readiness by a range of involved stakeholders for a new way of doing business, to name a few. But often overlooked is the role foundations play to ensure citizens have a seat at the table.
Grantmakers Taking the Lead

Philanthropic organizations face a range of tough questions when deciding how and where to allocate their dollars – what issues should they address? How can they make more of a difference with the dollars they invest? How can they work more effectively with their grantees and other grantmakers to jointly address a problem? How can they ensure greater, positive impact on the target populations they care about or serve?

Engaging citizens in consequential ways on pressing issues has long been both an aspiration and a conundrum. What will motivate citizens to volunteer the time to share their views and weigh in on their priorities? What convening strategies will reflect the full demographic diversity of the community? How do you ensure civil, productive conversation? What is required to link the engagement to real decisions so that it’s not just talk for talk’s sake?

In the four projects highlighted here, grantmakers and other philanthropic organizations responded to such challenges by joining forces to invest in large scale citizen deliberation. These projects allowed citizens to play a major role in shaping decisions that impacted them and their communities, such as:

- Plans to rebuild the World Trade Center site and its surrounding area;
- Strategies to revitalize the regional economy in Northeast Ohio;
- Recovery and rebuilding priorities in post-Katrina New Orleans; and,
- Reforming the healthcare system in America’s most populous state, California.

Each of these initiatives took bold steps to engage citizens on pressing public issues and grantmakers played a principal role in initiating, implementing and sustaining the efforts.

Engaging Thousands of Citizens

New York City Rebuilding After 9/11

Listening to the City was a large-scale town meeting to discuss the redevelopment of the World Trade Centre site, funded by The Rockefeller Foundation, The Atlantic Philanthropies, W.K. Kellogg Foundation and Rockefeller Brothers Fund, among others.

Listening to the City was organized by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, The Coalition to Rebuild Downtown New York and AmericaSpeaks.

Five-thousand citizens were convened – from the five boroughs of New York City, as well as suburban New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut – to shape the future plans and designs for the redevelopment of lower Manhattan in the aftermath of 9/11.

Participants of Listening to the City demonstrated the public’s desire for more vision and imagination than the six different proposed plans offered: collectively they decided that none of the plans was sufficient. As a result, elected officials and the governor quickly decided to “go back to the drawing board.”

With this new public mandate, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation launched an Innovative Design Study that integrated principles identified at Listening to the City, such as preserving the footprints of the Twin Towers for memorial-related space, restoring a powerful, tall symbol in Lower Manhattan’s skyline, reestablishing the street grid and improving connectivity within Lower Manhattan. The final plan incorporated many of these citizen priorities.

New Yorker architecture critic, Paul Goldberger, called the meeting “incredible.” He said, “I would be tempted to call it a turning point in the story not only of the World Trade Center, but of American planning in general.”

Leveraging Philanthropy to Make Citizen Engagement Count
Northeast Ohio
Fixing a Long-Ailing Economy

Voices & Choices was a new approach to revitalizing the economy of Northeast Ohio. In unprecedented fashion, a coalition of more than 80 local foundations (dubbed The Fund for Our Economic Future and led by The Cleveland Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, and The GAR Foundation) banded together with AmericaSpeaks to fund an eighteen-month citizen engagement process. Thousands of citizens hailing from Cleveland, Akron, Youngstown, and all of the suburban and rural areas in between, set an action agenda to rebuild the region’s economic future.

One of the largest public deliberations ever convened, Voices & Choices combined a variety of approaches for mobilizing the region’s citizenry, including one-on-one interviews, online forums and large-scale town meetings. More than 20,000 participants identified the region’s strengths, identified and prioritized its most important challenges, and brainstormed solutions.

President of the GAR Foundation, Robert Briggs, says, “Since the region’s philanthropic community came together to help transform Northeast Ohio’s economy, the region has gained significant ground.” The Fund for Our Economic Future applied the priorities that came out of Voices & Choices and created a regional action agenda called Advancing Northeast Ohio. Launched in March 2007, the plan has been endorsed by more than 150 public, private, and non-profit institutions.

Northeast Ohio has seen many new initiatives in the past year, expanding on four themes from Voices & Choices: business growth and attraction, talent development, growth through racial and economic inclusion, and government collaboration and efficiency.

The Fund continues to award significant grants to private and non-profit organizations whose efforts align with these four themes. The region’s mayors are now collaborating on tax revenue sharing and chamber of commerce heads are launching the region’s very first marketing campaign.

New Orleans
Towards Recovery & Rebuilding

Two Community Congresses focused on repairing a broken planning process in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. They established recovery priorities that would allow federal and state dollars to flow into the city. W.K. Kellogg, Rockefeller, Ford, and Greater New Orleans Foundations, among others, provided key financial support and guidance to work in concert with AmericaSpeaks to ensure that current New Orleans residents and those living in the diaspora cities of Atlanta, Baton Rouge, Dallas, and Houston, had a direct opportunity to set priorities for the planning and recovery process for their ravaged city.

At the heart of this planning process were two public forums unprecedented in their size and scope. The “Community Congresses” simultaneously engaged a total of 4,000 New Orleanians across the country in developing collective recovery priorities for their city.

With key decision-makers listening, citizens discussed how to ensure safety from future flooding, empower residents to rebuild safe and stable neighborhoods, provide incentives and housing so people could return, and establish sustainable, equitable public services. The resulting Unified New Orleans Plan addressed all city-wide systems, tackling infrastructure needs like housing, flood protection, transportation and public services.

The Unified New Orleans Plan process, and its unprecedented levels of citizen engagement, yielded powerful results in four ways:

- Established the credibility needed for real action. The full range of officials responsible for rebuilding New Orleans participated in the Unified Plan process and emerged, with citizens, as “co-owners” of a concrete action plan.
- Built a constituency committed to the work. The process built a citizenry energized both to stay involved and hold officials accountable for outcomes. Ninety-three percent of participants at the final Community Congress committed to remaining engaged.
• Helped restore hope. The Unified Plan restored a sense of hope, connection and extended community for the people of New Orleans, especially those in the diaspora.

• Secured $216 million in rebuilding funds. The citizen-driven recovery plan was approved by the New Orleans City Council, the Mayor, and the Louisiana Recovery Authority, leading the way to federal rebuilding funds for the districts, neighborhoods and city.

California Reforming Healthcare Statewide

CaliforniaSpeaks. The California Wellness Foundation, The California Endowment, and Blue Shield of California Foundation (along with several other grantmakers) funded an AmericaSpeaks effort that brought together 3,500 citizens across 8 cities simultaneously to weigh-in on healthcare reform options being considered by the Governor and bipartisan leaders of the California legislature. These resulting citizen priorities linked directly to intensive legislative discussions that occurred in the summer and fall of 2007.

Six proposed reforms to the existing healthcare system were presented and discussed throughout the day. Participants identified what they liked, what concerned them, what was missing and the conditions, if any, under which they would support each of these reforms:

• employer requirement to contribute to employee healthcare;

• expansion of government programs for vulnerable populations;

• guaranteed issue requirement for insurers;

• cap on insurer administrative costs and profits;

• individual mandate to have insurance; and

• government-based healthcare system.

The Governor and members of the Legislature who participated in CaliforniaSpeaks have kept healthcare reform on the state’s agenda. In late December 2007, the California State Assembly approved the first phase of a $14.4 billion plan to extend medical insurance to nearly all residents. However, the announcement of a $14 billion budget deficit for the state stalled the legislation in the Senate.
CaliforniaSpeaks also had a significant impact on participants’ involvement with healthcare. Ninety-five percent of participants reported having discussed California’s healthcare system with others since the town meeting. Participants were also significantly more likely to have taken action on the healthcare issue; 40% reported having contacted their representative compared to 12% for non-participants. Eight-percent said they had contacted the media compared to 3% of non-participants.

The California Endowment’s former Director of Communications and Public Affairs, Paul Hernandez, says that, “CaliforniaSpeaks really helped propel, accelerate, and contribute to the debate in a very meaningful way.” The thousands of participating Californians had an unprecedented opportunity to influence the policy making process by identifying what the public would support.

**Six Principles of Large Scale Citizen Engagement**

All four projects described above used 21st Century Town Meetings®, developed by AmericaSpeaks, as the method to engage citizens at a large scale and with influential results. “This is a way for people to feel that they can plug back in on a really important issue and have their voices heard,” says Crystal Hayling, President and CEO of the Blue Shield of California Foundation. “Whether you’re working on health, whether you’re working on education – citizens need to feel connected to the people who are making decisions, and these meetings are a terrific way to do that.”

Six core principles lie at the heart of planning these meetings:

1. **Diverse representation** ensures that the rich diversity of the community is represented in the process. Tailored outreach strategies are developed to recruit participants to who match the local population’s demographics.

2. **Informed participation** provides participants with highly accessible materials that neutrally frame the issues and provide a baseline of data upon which participants may begin their discussions. The meetings are designed to balance information sharing, discussion, and immediate feedback cycles on key policies and priorities.

3. **Facilitated deliberation** makes certain that citizens play an active role in the deliberations. Skilled table facilitators are recruited to ensure high quality dialogue at each table. The town meeting agenda is designed to help participants work through the tough issues of a policy or issue area and to help develop a common agenda for action.

4. **Shared priorities** are the endgame of each of these meetings. 21st Century Town Meetings® foster a high level of agreement among participants’ common priorities. Ideas from discussion tables are entered into networked computers, then “themed” into a list of ideas that were most commonly mentioned. Keypad polling prioritizes these ideas and is also used to measure the group’s overall support for proposed policies and actions.

5. **Link to action** is the goal of these citizen deliberations. Involvement of decision-makers and key leaders throughout the project is central to the success of these initiatives. Convening a meeting on a large scale (500 to 5,000 participants) enables the outcomes to have greater visibility and credibility with other policy-makers, the media, key stakeholders, and the public as a whole.

6. **Sustaining Citizen Engagement** in the policy-making process develops civic leadership and enhances implementation of public priorities. The process of organizing a public engagement meeting is a starting line for on-going support, tools and opportunities for citizens to take effective action on issues they care about.

In meetings that need to reach a very large geographic area – whether an entire state or region, or in strategic locations around the country – the town meeting method can be extended to multiple sites in which all participants, regardless of location, are linked via satellite or webcast and participate in the meeting simultaneously. Past projects have linked as many as ten sites by satellite and sixteen sites through webcast.
Pressing Issues Can Require Accelerated Decision Cycles. There is no shortage of critical policy issues being addressed by grantmakers. The right issue for large-scale citizen engagement can be identified by looking for: when there is a gap in expert opinion and citizen understanding that stands in the way of dialogue; or when the those who are most affected by the issues have not had an opportunity to participate on equal footing.

Certain projects – for example, in disaster recovery – require funders to have a capacity to make funding decisions much more quickly than is commonly practiced. Funders need to be ready to commit the funds on much more accelerated timetables than usual to launch a project and keep it going so that organizers can respond but not take undue financial and political risks on their own.

Funding Follow-up. In both New York and New Orleans, organizers and funders placed most of their attention on producing the town meeting and not enough attention on positioning for the important follow-on work – work that could leverage the results into policy decisions and continue to engage citizens in future decision-making on the same issues. In contrast, significant dollars were set aside in California to fund continued communications and engagement with citizens, which encouraged persistent citizen advocacy and collaboration with leaders and decision-makers to ensure they fully understood the public’s priorities. Paying attention to and providing funding for key follow-up activities is critical to maximizing an initiative’s impact.

Commitment to Comprehensive Outreach. Funders of citizen engagement projects have found that the outcome’s legitimacy often relies on the representativeness of participants. Ensuring a demographically representative attendance at a town meeting is labor-intensive, and requires a larger than customary investment in time and dollars for outreach and communications. In New York, in addition to outreach by dozens of non-profit organizations, outreach staff members were hired to recruit in all key geographic areas and within racial and ethnic groups across the tri-state region. The results were 4500 attendees who closely represented the region’s demographics.

Lessons Learned

Decision-makers and grant-makers may not be accustomed to organizing citizen engagement on a large scale, which often means they must take calculated political and financial risks. Foundations that have assumed these risks have learned a range of interesting lessons that can help inform future practice.

Commitment to Long-term Collaboration. In Northeast Ohio, The Fund collaboratively decided that citizen engagement was core to the work of economic revitalization of the region. At the start of Voices & Choices, they had already created an ongoing governance body to fund and oversee the work, so when they entered the citizen engagement phase, they were well organized, clear on intended outcomes, and committed to long-term results. Having built strong relationships throughout the project, they now continue to fund an impressive body of implementation work.

Strategic, Targeted Roles in Projects. Involvement by program officers can, at times, be essential to the success of the project. In New Orleans, one of the lead funders played a crucial role in securing the support of key stakeholders and politicians, and lent a steady hand to a sometimes volatile and politicized planning process. In California, officers from all three of the major grantmakers played key roles in giving the project a visibility and credibility it otherwise might not have had.

In all of these projects, turnout by the traditionally ‘hard-to-reach’ ethnic, racial, and income groups is impressive and frequently reaches the actual percentages of the local community.

Paying attention to and providing funding for key follow-up activities is critical to maximizing an initiative’s impact.

“Hard-to-Reach” Populations. Even when the outreach is done effectively and comprehensively, certain populations are still difficult to recruit. Yet, in all of these projects, turnout by the traditionally ‘hard-to-reach’ ethnic, racial, and income groups is impressive and frequently reaches the actual...
percentages of the local community. Through intensive community partnerships and outreach efforts, participants of the Unified New Orleans Plan closely reflected pre-Katrina New Orleans, where 64% of attendees were African American and 25% had an annual household income below $20,000.

Joining Forces on Critical Issues

Citizen engagement projects at this scale do not happen without the strategic support and guidance of grant-makers. Grant-makers have taken the leap to join forces in impressive new ways to enable citizen voices to be heard. In all four cases discussed here, the issues in play had reached a critical stage that called for greater public involvement.

In New York City, plans for rebuilding the World Trade Center site were accelerating and there was great concern that the final blueprints would be drawn without reflecting the needs and desires of New York’s residents.

In Northeast Ohio, the economy had been ailing for several decades and little effort had been made to address this regionally or in concert with citizens who would play a critical role in implementing any new strategies.

In New Orleans, a series of dysfunctional planning processes at every level of government had left the city in further disarray after Hurricane Katrina, and citizens had largely been relegated to an observer status in these processes.

In California, the Governor, tired of watching failed federal efforts do anything more than tinker with healthcare reform, decided that it was time to fix the system at the state level. He and the legislative leadership knew that only authentic citizen input would build momentum for finding agreement.

Key to making genuine progress on policy issues that grantmakers care about is ensuring:

1. the full demographic diversity of the community is involved and represented,
2. the information guiding the discussion is fair and balanced,
3. the dialogue is well planned and facilitated, and
4. the decision-makers are directly involved and intend to use the input to reshape the future.

Citizen engagement projects at this scale do not happen without the strategic support and guidance of grant-makers.
Listening to the City Funders: The Atlantic Philanthropies • AOL Time Warner • Brookfield Properties • Con Edison, Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) • Deutsche Bank • W.K. Kellogg Foundation • Keyspan • Lower Manhattan Development Corporation • Merrill Lynch • JP Morgan Chase • Port Authority of New York and New Jersey • Rockefeller Brothers Fund • The Rockefeller Foundation • Surdna Foundation

Unified New Orleans Plan Community Congresses Funders: Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation • Carnegie Corporation of New York • The Case Foundation • The Ford Foundation • The Greater New Orleans Foundation • W.K. Kellogg Foundation • Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation • Rockefeller Brothers Fund • The Rockefeller Foundation • Surdna Foundation

CaliforniaSpeaks Funders: Alliance Healthcare Foundation • Blue Shield of California Foundation • The California Endowment • The California Wellness Foundation • The San Francisco Community Foundation • Sierra Health Foundation

Voices & Choices Funders: The 1525 Foundation • The Abington Foundation • Akron Community Foundation • Ashland County Partnership For Our Economic Future • Ashtabula Partnership • Bober, Markey, Fedorovich & Company • BP Fund of The Cleveland Foundation • The Brentwood Foundation • Brian A. Bass Charitable Fund • Burton D. Morgan Foundation • The Catholic Diocese of Cleveland Foundation • Charter One Bank • The Cleveland Clinic • The Cleveland Foundation • Cleveland Social Venture Partners • Community Foundation of Greater Lorain • D. Robert and Kathleen L. Barber Fund of The Cleveland Foundation • David and Inez Myers Foundation • Deaconess Community Foundation • Elizabeth Ring Mather and William Gwinn Mather Fund • Eva L. and Joseph M. Bruening Foundation • The FAC Group • FirstEnergy Foundation • FirstMerit Bank • Forest City Enterprises Charitable Foundation, Inc. • Frances G. and Lewis Allen Foundation • Frances G. Shoolroy Donor Advised Fund • Fred A. Lennon Dom Foundation • The GAR Foundation Gund Foundation • The George W. • The Golba Family • Greater Cleveland Foundation, Inc. • Gross Builders Huntington Fund for Education • John S. and The Joyce Foundation • Katherine and Lee Smith Foundation • Kulas Foundation • Lake Lloyd L. and Louise K. Smith • Memorial Foundation • The Martha Holden Jennings Mt. Sinai Health Care Foundation • John P. Murphy Foundation • The Murphy Family Foundation • The Nord Family Foundation • The Nordson Corporation Foundation • Northern Ohio Golf Charities Foundation • The Norton Family Foundation • Ohio Savings Charitable Fund • Jane and Jon Outcalt Foundation • Ralph and Esther Warburton Foundation • Richland County Coalition for Our Economic Future • RPM International, Inc. Corporate Giving Program • Saint Luke's Foundation • The Sherwick Fund • The Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton • The Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland • Sky Bank • Stark Community Foundation • The Stocker Foundation • Susan and John Turben Foundation • Thomas and Joann Adler Family Foundation • Thomas H. White Foundation, A KeyBank Trust • Tim and Susan Curtiss Family Fund of The Cleveland Foundation • Vincent K. & Edith H. Smith Memorial Trust • White Hat Management, LLC • Whitehead Family Fund of The Cleveland Foundation • William A. and Margaret N. Mitchell Fund of The Cleveland Foundation • William J. and Dorothy K. O'Neill Foundation • W.K. Kellogg Foundation • The Wuliger Foundation, Inc.