



CityClub

Community Matters Campaign Final Report

I. Executive Summary

CityClub's annual Community Matters Campaign promotes diverse forms of civic participation—from voting to volunteerism and philanthropy, from individual action to organizational collaboration and community deliberation. The 2008 campaign involved 1,100 King County residents and 25 organizations and community groups who participated in forums, surveys, dialogues and debates about the current political season and changing definitions of community engagement.

This is what we learned from their input:

- that the very words “civic engagement” are not only ambiguous, but for many people, have a decidedly negative connotation. When government officials, educators and organizations try to encourage community involvement by using the term “civic engagement,” they are actually establishing a barrier to their cause.
- that there is no comprehensive regular measurement of civic engagement in King County; this vital indicator is not included in our community's regular assessments of social health and vitality. We believe it should be and recommend that understanding civics and current events, participating in politics, public trust, informal volunteering, net roots activities and social networking, support for green living, civic expression and deliberation be added to local assessments that measure our community's health.
- that actual civic participation is much more diverse and distributed in the community than is indicated by traditional metrics of voting, volunteerism and philanthropic giving. We found that in addition to these contributions, King County residents participate in a spectrum of day-to-day, neighbor-to-neighbor informal activities that help build strong neighborhoods and community vitality. When these contributions are not officially measured and recognized, they are likely overlooked and undervalued.
- that all forms of community participation are affected substantially by barriers—including excessive commute times, limited language and transportation access, and negative public trust—and opportunities—including diverse cultural activities and resources, and focusing attention on active youth engagement and the welcome and orientation of newcomers to King County.
- that the most effective way to stimulate community participation and a sense of belonging is to eliminate barriers and increase connectivity. This means investing in local, personal—formal and informal—modes for interaction and participation: more places (parks, libraries) and opportunities (festivals, cultural events) to gather; and more support for existing networks of neighbors reaching out to neighbors and residents connecting to fellow residents through demographic affiliations and common interests using both net- and grassroots delivery systems.

In response to these findings, CityClub is framing new language to communicate about civic engagement, language that is inclusive, meaningful and positive; using public feedback from the campaign to help guide the content of CityClub programs throughout the year; disseminating these results to community leaders, the public and the media for their use in deliberation and policymaking; and advocating the ongoing tracking and reporting of civic engagement as a vital measure of our community's health.

II. Project Background

The Community Matters Campaign (formerly known as Civic Participation Month) has been a pivot of CityClub's annual programming since 2001. Opening with United Way's Day of Caring in September and ending with Election Day in November, the campaign promotes personal engagement and organizational collaboration across a full spectrum of civic activity including voter preparation, volunteerism, philanthropy, public dialogue, deliberation and community building.

III. 2008 Theme: Re-imagining Civic Engagement

In 2008, the campaign theme and structure were developed by a cohort of community organizations eager to investigate the changing meaning and components of civic engagement and the state of civic vitality in King County. They included: AIA Seattle, Communities Count, Executive Service Corps, Group Health Cooperative, King County Auditors Office, Municipal League of King County, The Seattle Foundation, Sustainable Seattle/B-Sustainable, Seattle Works, United Way of King County, Washington Women's Foundation and YMCA of Greater Seattle.

We discovered that there is no comprehensive regular measurement of civic engagement locally. Additionally, in reviewing national studies, we felt that the metrics used traditionally to assess civic engagement—voting, volunteerism and philanthropy—seemed inadequate to capture the diverse ways King County's citizens participate in and contribute to community. We decided to focus the Community Matters Campaign on public programs, surveys and dialogues to prompt community response to these questions:

- How are you involved in community?
- What barriers exist toward your increased participation?
- What recommendations do you have for boosting our community's civic health?
- What steps will you take to increase your own civic engagement?

IV. Goals

The campaign was designed with the following goals:

- To raise awareness and foster dialogue about the importance of civic engagement;
- To take a snapshot of civic engagement in King County;
- To model democratic public deliberation;
- To foster personal and communal civic participation along a trajectory from education to dialogue to action;
- To inform voting;
- To develop new metrics to describe and measure civic engagement;
- To engage civic leaders in addressing the value of regularly tracking and reporting King County's civic health.

V. Methods

The Community Matters Campaign engaged 1,100 King County residents¹ using the following program elements:

- **Educational Forums** - In-depth, non-partisan information and opinion offered by experts, community leaders and policymakers in seven live public forums and candidate debates on health care, environmental stewardship, public education and current elections and ballot initiatives. The sessions were presented to live public audiences totaling 750 and made available through repeated statewide cable television broadcast, streaming and podcasting to up to 1.3 million households.
- **Surveys** – 260 Community Matters Campaign participants completed surveys detailing the ways they currently participate in community.
- **Community Dialogues** – CityClub hosted 19 facilitated community conversations where 350 participants discussed the components of civic engagement and weighed in on the barriers and opportunities they see for strengthening it.
- **Action** –Community Matters Campaign participants were asked to deepen their civic engagement personally and communally. 164 participants signed individual pledge cards

listing specific civic investments they intend to make during the next 12 months. They also voted on the most salient strategies our community should take to strengthen civic capital. At the end of the campaign, CityClub awarded 5 “People’s Choice” micro-grants to non-profit community organizations addressing the identified strategies.

VI. Community Report

The Community Matters Campaign concludes with this report to policymakers, the press, and the public summarizing what we learned and highlighting participants’ observations and recommendations. We offer this data as grounds for further investigation, deliberation and action to improve our civic health.

VII. General Conclusions

1. Civic participation is much more diverse and distributed in the community than we recognize and measure using the traditional indicators of voting, volunteerism and philanthropic giving. While those activities are strongly practiced by CMC participants, they represent only a fraction of the ways they are engaged²:

knowing at least 2 neighbors	87.9%
<i>voting regularly</i>	<i>85.6%</i>
staying informed about current events	85.2%
attending ethnic and cultural events	76.3%
<i>donating money for causes/organizations</i>	<i>75.5%</i>
making changes in the last 6 months to live green	61.9%
<i>donating 4+ volunteer hours monthly</i>	<i>54.7%</i>
communicating with govt/community leaders	53.9%
attending public hearings/meetings/forums	51.0%
participating in neighborhood activities	49.4%
participating in a virtual community	48.0%
raising money for causes/organizations	42.2%
helping a neighbor with chores	41.1%
creating/sharing art, food, music	40.7%
serving on a non-profit or community board	40.3%
membership in a community group	33.3%
participating in social change actions	32.2%
helping those affected by natural disaster	30.6%
professional employment in community work	28.3%
donating blood	27.9%
writing letters to the editor/op eds or blogging	24.0%
serving on a govt/community committee	20.9%
participating in a national service program	9.3%

Our CMC results mirror this national finding:

“There are considerably more options today for expressing political views than existed 30 years ago and some (such as voting on online videos or commenting on blogs) are quite prevalent, engaging people who previously were not engaged.”³

2. Not only are the measures we use to monitor civic engagement insufficient, the very language we use to talk about it is part of the problem. At best, there is no clear understanding nor consensus about what the term “civic engagement” means. But even more damning are indications that the term itself negatively impacts people—especially young people who find it officious and dated. When organizations try to encourage community involvement by using the words “civic engagement,” they are actually establishing a barrier to their cause.

“Americans give ambivalent responses to most words and phrases that are used to describe and promote civic engagement...we still need more compelling ways to talk about active and collaborative civic engagement in simple language that connects to how Americans communicate about their civic activities.”⁴

3. One of the most glaring omissions in traditional assessments of civic engagement is the day-to-day, neighbor-to-neighbor informal activities that are a key part of strong neighborhoods and

community vitality. CMC participants affirmed the importance of the valued conditions for “community strength” expressed by King County residents in designing the Communities Count assessment⁵ – neighborhood social cohesion, public trust, involvement in cultural and religious life, the value of diversity, and inter-generational interactions. These indicators should be included with the traditional metrics of voting, volunteerism and philanthropy in any comprehensive measurement of civic health.

4. CMC dialogue participants were motivated by the process of civic deliberation that included dialogue and opportunities for personal and communal action. Every dialogue group discussed how rare and enjoyable it was to come together to talk about community building. In the post-dialogue “pledge for civic action,” a majority of participants committed to increase their level of civic participation.⁶

Our local experience mirrors national results. The 2008 Civic Health Index reports:

“Last year’s Civic Health Index report found strong support for civic engagement. Asked the best way to address problems in their community, very few chose ‘let the government define the problem and take action.’ An outright majority favored collaboration between citizens and institutions. But many respondents said opportunities for such work were inadequate. For instance, only 43% of respondents said there was a place where they could go to discuss issues facing their communities.”⁷

These comments lead us to conclude that the most effective ways to stimulate civic engagement are to change the language we use to describe and promote it, focus on eliminating other barriers to participation and, on the positive front, increase connectivity. This means investing in local, personal, formal and informal modes of community building: people reaching out to neighbors and affiliates through net- and grassroots delivery systems, face-to-face and virtual.

VIII. Participant Observations

Beyond these general conclusions on civic engagement, CMC dialogue participants addressed specific barriers and opportunities to boost civic health. Their discussions focused on three topics selected by the CMC organizing committee. Following are the most salient observations and recommendations reported by the dialogue facilitators. They represent both summaries of comments and, where indicated, direct quotes from dialogue participants. (Additional dialogue participant suggestions can be found on the B-Sustainable website at www.b-sustainable.org.)

a. Access to Voting and Volunteerism

People of lower income don’t volunteer less; they volunteer differently, in more informal contexts. “Random acts of kindness” are usually not random at all on the part of the practitioners; they are part of an ethos of caring for neighbors and community in ways that aren’t counted because they aren’t done through formal organizations. We need to find ways to recognize these vital civic contributions.

The biggest barriers to involvement stem from lack of social equity across divisions of class, race, ethnicity and language. Language barriers are a serious deterrent to civic participation. Public investment should be made to tap into the strong desire for civic participation from non-English speaking members of our community.

There is strong affirmation that overwork, lack of time, traffic and travel distance negatively impact volunteerism and community participation. “When there are things I can volunteer to do just by walking by, I do it—like helping my neighbor rake his yard. I hate to sign up to volunteer.” Promoting a walkable community and better transportation access will increase community connection and engagement.

Voting takes self-initiative. The existing voting and initiative process overwhelms many voters who feel there are too many votes and not enough clear information. There is also a lack of trust in the voting process. While there is general support for voting by mail because it increases access, there is also doubt about whether our votes are tabulated accurately. People also articulated the feeling of a loss of community as voting at home supports the exercise of this important civic function in isolation rather than among neighbors.

As a society, we should focus strong attention on registering young voters and encouraging their participation. Teaching positive civic behavior through direct experience at an early age will create positive patterns for a lifetime. There should be a mobile unit (like a bookmobile) that goes around to schools and community centers and teaches civics. It could be manned by CityYear or Americorps volunteers and supported through government and/or corporate funding.

b. Cultural Richness

It is important for people to be both art observers and art makers or participants. Lack of funding for arts in the schools is a serious problem. We lose a generation of arts patrons, arts makers, and arts participants. There is too much emphasis on the WASL driving educational priorities.

“Arts should be accessible to the person on the street; not be a destination.” There is strong affirmation—both pride in and desire for—public art in Seattle and overwhelming appreciation for our excellent parks and libraries. Participants said they want to broaden the definition of public art to include performances, festivals, and other (sometimes spontaneous) activities that can affect arts in everyday life.

The true cultural richness of our community is under the radar and not fully appreciated, just like (and probably for the same reasons as) the full range of volunteering, cultural richness is hard to count; it happens informally and in neighborhoods. South King County was cited as a prime example of this case. While Communities Count reports that it has the least number of formal arts and cultural organizations in King County⁸, our dialogue participants recognized its rich informal network of arts activities, art making and cultural events.

Local media and/or public arts agencies should mount a “share our arts” or “good news” initiative. “Arts minutes” could highlight arts activities of all scope and kind as a way to broadcast our cultural richness and diversity and draw attention to the arts happening in the neighborhoods.

With the construction of Sound Transit, we have a unique generational opportunity to link communities into a more cohesive County community. Local arts and cultural events should be promoted in Sound Transit stations and one neighborhood should be invited to another through Sound Transit. Perhaps the public arts being programmed for Sound Transit could, in part, be used to develop strategies and communications to link neighborhood arts organizations and resources.

c. Public Trust

“The lack of public trust in our government is a huge issue” attributable to our confusing initiative/referendum process, drawn-out public decision making processes (transportation was the most frequently cited example), lack of trust in ballot counting, and unfavorable interactions with police officer and other authority figures.

Media contributes to a lack of public trust in the way bad news is sensationalized. Participants noted that stories are reported initially in daily headlines but not followed up in detail to let people understand the subtleties of events and how they are resolved. This is destructive of social capital.

Many people cited a lack of public spaces at which they could gather formally and informally. To increase public trust, we need more community gathering places and rituals/opportunities for interaction. Parks, community work days, celebrations, caucuses, recreational, sports and cultural activities are all valuable, positive ways to build community. There is trust within our faith communities.

While a large number of participants expressed pride and a strong connection to their own neighborhoods, they felt that our neighborhoods are isolated from one another. Neighborhood affiliation decreases among renters and single people. Established neighborhood residents should be encouraged to reach out to welcome newcomers. We should find a way to capitalize on the bonding expressed through neighborhood affiliation to build more bridges between

neighborhoods.⁹ Community blogs are noted as one tool to use technology to enhance neighborhood cohesion.

People below age 30 have skepticism about neighborhood social cohesion. They feel that social cohesion by geography is an outdated construct as there are fewer homeowners in their demographic. They feel a more fluid, multidimensional concept of community is reflective of their reality—community by demographic and cultural association.

People strongly value libraries, community centers, parks and public events as building blocks of community. They also like local programs like the Neighborhood Matching Fund and Neighborhood Night Out.

Children contribute to social cohesion and encourage parents to invest in their neighborhoods. We need to include affordable housing and places for families in our neighborhoods especially as our population grows and density increases. We need safe, child- and family-friendly neighborhoods that have good schools.

There is a general impression that the “Seattle Freeze” syndrome is true; that it is hard for newcomers to break into Seattle’s civic and social networks. To increase social capital we should consciously create opportunities to increase “welcoming and orienting” in the social fabric of our community. This can be through individuals’ actions, through organizations and through institutions—media, government, nonprofit organizations, neighborhood and community groups.

IX. People’s Choice Awards

At the end of the CMC campaign, CityClub awarded five \$1,000 People’s Choice micro-grants and two commendations to non-profit community organizations that positively impact our social capital. These organizations address specific barriers and opportunities for improvement identified by participants in the 2008 Community Matters Campaign community dialogues.

Strategy: Fight racism and hate crimes

Micro-grant recipient: **Seattle Young People’s Project** for its work empowering youth (ages 13-18) to express themselves and take action on the issues that affect their lives.

Strategy: Make voter registration easier and increase access to voting.

Micro-grant recipient: **ACLU of Washington** for its work in helping felons restore their voting rights.

Strategy: Increase immigrant and refugee resources, e.g. availability of ESL courses

Micro-grant recipient: **Refugee Women’s Alliance for its work in** promoting inclusion, independence, personal leadership and strong communities for refugee and immigrant women and families with culturally appropriate services.

Strategy: Subsidize public transportation for low income residents

Micro-grant recipient: **Neighborhood House** (Transportation Program)

Neighborhood House provides low-cost, door-to-door transportation to low-income people, the elderly and those with disabilities who need special help getting to medical appointments or community events. It transports low-income people to job search and job training activities.

Strategy: Increase number and service/hours of parks, green spaces and community centers

Micro-grant recipient: **Pomegranate Center**

Pomegranate Center empowers communities to create meaningful gathering places—public spaces for conversation, sharing information, performances, celebrations and play.

Strategy: Increase access to King County arts and cultural events

Commendation: **Artist Trust**

Artist Trust works statewide to support the holistic needs of artists living and working in our community.

Strategy: Increase access to information technology

Commendation: **Technology Access Foundation (TAF)**

TAF offers free, yearlong after-school academic enrichment to underserved children of color through project-based learning.

X. Final Recommendations

While there are numerous citizen recommendations included in Sections VI and VII of this report, the following target the central theme of the 2008 Community Matters Campaign—re-imagining civic engagement in our community.

1. Civic health is a critical indicator of community strength and vitality. When it is not counted—regularly monitored and reported—it is discounted. King County's civic health should be measured and reported regularly as part of the ongoing assessment of our community's social, economic and cultural vitality.

Seattle/King County needs a more comprehensive way to assess its civic health. While various government agencies and local foundations and organizations regularly measure certain indicators of civic engagement,¹⁰ there are critical indicators—e.g. understanding civics and current events, participating in politics, public trust, informal volunteering, net roots activities and social networking, support for green living, civic expression and deliberation—that are not measured nor tracked at all.

The scattered data we do have are not assembled into a composite picture of our civic health nor are they benchmarked against national standards or our own development over time. The metrics we use to measure civic health should be reviewed and redefined with an eye towards the national CHI index as a guide. This would allow for national benchmarking of local trends.

2. We need to develop updated, more inclusive ways to talk about and promote civic engagement within leadership circles and in the public. There is public will and enthusiasm for more civic deliberation and commitment—including dialogue with the opportunity to take action. But the question is how to harness it. Our findings suggest that the most effective ways to stimulate civic engagement will focus on eliminating barriers and increasing connectivity. This means investing in local, personal—formal and informal—modes of civic engagement: people being able to reach out to neighbors and others through demographic affiliations and common interests using both net-and grassroots delivery systems. It also means developing ongoing ways to welcome, orient, connect and involve newcomers to our community.

XI. CityClub Response

In response to the findings and recommendations of this report, CityClub is committed to work as a convener in the civic community to:

- share report findings and conclusions with policymakers, the media and the public in order to link citizen input to leader accountability and better public policy;
- frame new language to communicate about civic engagement, language that is more inclusive, meaningful and positive;
- advocate for the ongoing tracking and reporting of this expanded definition of civic engagement as a vital measure of our community's health;
- use this data to fuel the content of ongoing CityClub programs throughout the year;
- scale the Community Dialogues of 2008 within a second Community Matters Campaign in 2009.

Acknowledgements and Notes

¹ Dialogue participants were solicited primarily through partner organizations. There were also individuals who hosted dialogues in their homes. Following is a list of the Community Matters Dialogues hosts: Baker/Douglas Families, CityClub , CityClub Board of Governors, Executive Service Corps of Washington, Factoria/Eastside Medical Center Council, Gonzalez Family, Group Health Cooperative Burien Medical Center Council, Next Chapter of Puget Sound and, Sustainable Wallingford, Rainier Beach Community Blockwatch Group, RSVP, SEAPAX - Seattle Area Peace Corps Volunteers, Squire Park Community Council, Sustainable Seattle, United Way of King County Day of Caring Homelessness Fair, University of Washington Bothell - Master of Arts in Policy Studies, University of Washington - Center for Experiential Learning, Washington Women's Foundation and YWCA of Seattle - King County - Snohomish County.

² Analysis of data from the community dialogues was done by a graduate policy studies class at the University of Washington, Bothell in Winter 2008. We warmly thank Lynne Davis, Craig Edwards, Brad Nonaka, Damian Rainey, Rachel Reichert, Mari Taylor for their smart, hard work under the inspirational guidance of Dr. Shauna Carlisle. We also thank Megan Horst for her leadership, energy and wisdom throughout the Community Matters Campaign; she was an instrumental partner to us from concept development through the editing of this report.

³ National Conference on Citizenship, *America's 2008 Civic Health Index: Beyond the Vote*, p.5. <http://www.ncoc.net/index.php?tray=topic&tid=top5&cid=9>

⁴ *ibid*, p.5.

⁵ Communities Count, *Social and Health Indicators Across King County*, p. 82. <http://www.communitiescount.org>

⁶ *CityClub Community Matters Campaign: Learning from Each Other to Build a Better Community*, University of Washington Bothell, 2008, www.seattlecityclub.org

⁷ *America's 2008 Civic Health Index: Beyond the Vote*, p.10.

⁸ Communities Count, *Social and Health Indicators Across King County*, p. 111.

⁹ See Robert Putnam's discussion of "bonding" and "bridging" social capital <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/saquaro/faqs.htm>

¹⁰ Seattle Foundation and Philanthropy Northwest measure philanthropy; United Way of King County tracks volunteerism, the Washington Secretary of State measures voting, Communities Count and Sustainable Seattle's B-Sustainable measure multiple indicators of cultural participation, public trust and neighborhood social cohesion.