# NCDD session notes[[1]](#footnote-1) – Workspace – Politics, Policy, and Citizen Participation in City Governance

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**Participants**

* Phil Rabinowitz – hands across North Quabbin
* Imre Kapish – Holyoke, working with young people on youth empowerment and engagement, particularly disadvantaged – with Holyoke Master Plan process
* Samantha Washburn-Baronie, Legislative Aide, Representative David P. Linsky constituent services
* Michele Holt-Shannon, UNH, - Dover listens, came from issue-based, some contentious issues, new in policy
* Nick Connell, Everyday Democracy – personal interest in micro policy work., ED hopes that communities can build groundwork to grow long enough to get to structural changes and policy is one of those., interested in heterogeneous organizing issues, and get to how can people participate in bringing their ideas to bear on policy changes.

**Key Concepts Explored**

Questions

* How do we define community? Is there such a thing as a collective voice? or desired community outcomes?
* What obstacles and opportunities exist for citizen participation in such contexts?
* How do we define and observe engagement in these multi-public environments?

Process Issues

* transparency and trust are critical
* Perfection is not a goal. Messiness is real
* a mix of people in the room
* you need to start with one of the right people
* guiding who the stakeholders are is an issue

Potential Barriers

* Can you just get this issue settled motive – efficiency drive
* power dynamics, power structures
* what are the barriers to their voice being heard
* If you don’t have the other side of the coin
* Can have all the right people in the room but the government people don’t listen
* if you don’t view yourself as heterogeneous you don’t ask who isn’t here

Suggested Strategies

* uncover the invisible
* you need to start with the right people
* building networks to get people to the table
* Organizations getting a track record, getting known
* Example of nonprofit facilitating youth

**Summary of research – Felicia and Rebecca**

* Felicia
  + Spaces and learning for civic skills, knowledge about how to be engaged, link citizens with initiatives – role of nonprofits / community groups?
    - Youth organizations with social justice / civic engagement bent
  + Ways of practice to engage max amount of engagement
* Rebecca
  + Economic Development goal and policy setting. The alignment of community economic development preferences with goals and policies in 3 Massachusetts cities (Leominster, Worcester, Pittsfield)
  + Summary available here: <https://docs.google.com/document/edit?id=1YUNBxdPDCMv0ca24g2sH986H7N80SujyxAgcH4fevnI&hl=en&authkey=CLi96c0N>

**Discussion Notes**

* Q. at municipal/community level, what is a community, how do you define it, who gets listened to, is there a community voice? Does the voice presented as the community represent that community?
  + How do you create community objectives when there may not be consensus?
    - Michele: disenfranchised voices, power structures – those who are not listened to. How do we enfranchise participation? Experience in Portsmouth, NH – site for ‘our budget our economy’ – charge was to get a demographically representative group in the room. Income piece was huge – asking people to sit all day on a Saturday
      * How to offset lost wages, gas cards, childcare
      * Was a struggle- should we do that?
      * One thing that worked for diversifying the group – leveraging connections within group that does come out
        + Compensation was provided on a person by person basis.
        + Based in connections
    - Felicia: were you working with community based groups? – yes some were groups
    - Felicia: was city government involved? No
    - Nick: in our work someone will contact us and we try to figure out on what scope / scale they want to address, what resources exist – what voices are left out, what connections do you have – lot about outcomes…move conversation or? – facilitates large scale grassroots movements.
    - Felicia: what sort of groups come to you?
    - Nick: all sorts. We help them to say who needs to be in such a conversation if you want it to move in a certain directions – moving to change structural impediments….need gatekeepers, or to access them..
    - Felicia: groups recognizing need for capacity – how do groups get to that point? - Ex. Lowell just went through a Master Plan session. Heavily immigrant city – no one communicated this to the facilitator.
    - Phil – consultant wasn’t asking the questions either. Someone hired ought to know that stuff. ***How do you define community***? Are you talking about Cambodian community, low-income, the whole community? I’ve come at this from both directions. Now I try to pull people in, prior ran adult literacy to get people in. In general city governments tend to look at guys like me – what I want is what people want. If consultant doesn’t ask that…..at one point I worked as consultant for Holyoke community college – town assessment of need for adult ed program in Ludlow. Was talking to usual suspects, had a partner working on it. At one point talked to a hitchhiker about the project – hitchhiker said there is a huge Portuguese population in Ludlow – turns out to be sports club that is the social center. Work within own community, never needed to learn language – so uncovering the population – ***uncovering the invisible***
    - Michelle – **guiding who the stakeholders are is an issue**. Example of great bay stakeholders – 44 towns. Thinking about how to be involved and be I touch.
    - Nick: at some point it is locally defined
    - Michelle – it will be regional. Will be interesting, who makes the decision.
    - Nick – neighborhoods in Miami and Manhattan
    - Samantha – experience with large cities. Did comparison of NYC and MA paid sick day legislation. Also drew in San Francisco, where has been very successful. City Councilor in NYC wanted to meet face to face and speak of origin. Constituents came to her….better with groups as opposed to individuals. State v. city. In city it is more understood which organizations will be involved (will prepare for opposition before it hits them) – ex. Small business opposition to the sick day, gain support in advance of those who will be in support. Gained support from domestic workers, women’s organizations. Feel like is easier to get things accomplished in NYC, as opposed to smaller town with back door deals.
    - Felicia – why do you think that is?
    - Samantha – I think in NYC it is very partisan, easier to move bills forward. Nonprofits are more influential than government. People do participate – level of community building, level of attachment to their space, even transient residents are part of the community.
    - Phil – did you feel more attached to NY or your neighborhood?
    - Sam – to NYC more than the neighborhood. Recognized issues of diversity race are pervasive
    - Felicia: NYC views itself as heterogeneous place, whereas smaller cities in MA don’t view themselves that way.
    - Michelle: yes, agrees. ***One of the ways that plays out is that if you don’t view yourself as heterogeneous you don’t ask who isn’t here.***
    - Imre: how do you define community – such a difficult question – for me it is affinity groups, etc. …**power dynamics, power structures**. How organized is the community, how doe their voice come out. ***what are the barriers to their voice being heard.***
    - Rebecca: what are the ingredients for success
    - Michelle: **a mix of people in the room**
    - Nick: won’t get it right at first
    - Michelle: in gambling example had more men and older folks that you wanted, but it was still a positive process. ***Perfection is not a goal. Messiness is real.***
    - Nick: ***transparency is critical*** – honest and authentic with the process. People who were excluded, can you say you tried, we failed, keep adding in entry points throughout the process. The more creative people the better. Back to the space issue: if you said there are 15 different kinds, we need these 3 if we want to achieve our goal….that takes precedence.
    - Phil: 2 side s to the dialogue – not only do you have to get the right people in the room, **you have to get the government people to listen**. **Can have all the right people in the room but the government people don’t listen**. Also in order to get the right people in the room, **you need to start with one of the right people**. Phil writes the community toolbox – website out of UKansas that has practices in community capacity building. I am constantly saying start with the people you know, and reach out to the people they know. If you know one person in that community within 5 moves you can reach all. You have to go piece by piece. I believe that it is on a personal basis. If you start with organizations, and who those people know
    - Nick – tied to this is what are you selling. There is no need to use this process to oversell. ***If you don’t have the other side of the coin***
    - Imre: How do you get people to come to the table? ***Trust***. Need to be able to address that. Feel like they want us as a token. Why don’t they come to us? Feel like they always want us to come to them. Is there a mechanism to go to them. Having local meetings
    - Nick: don’t have the meeting in the church in the white side of town
    - Rebecca: any strategies of success?? How to overcome resource challenges?
    - Imre: we got young people involved in Master planning process in Holyoke. We did outreach to youth, brought them in for 30 minutes, linked up with other youth groups. Had them express themselves first in small group. Having staff there, and supporting them. ***Example of nonprofit facilitating youth***. Facilitator tried to turn youth away from the door
    - Samantha – who were the facilitator/consultants here!
    - Imre: having them participate was really changing ideas. The youth had their own stereotypes as well. Community organizations can play a vital role
    - Felicia: was that something that the org started or from the government?
    - Imre: we started it.
    - Nick: Stratford, CT. Mayor initiated it. Gave staff person in community office to reach out and facilitate with Everyday Democracy. Interplay between Mayor wanting to appoint certain leaders, but wanted it to be a community thing.
    - Felicia: what motivated the Mayor to do that?
    - Nick: tensions around racism
    - Phil: hands across North Quabbin have started to do some things. Campaign for community collaboration. Get organizations to do things that are collaborative. One of first participants is selectmen of largest town.  ***Organizations getting a track record, getting known, building networks to get people to the table.***
    - Michelle: struck that there is a great old article ‘slow down and save the world” – this is about a marathon not a sprint you will get further. Partnered with an individual who spoke up against an issue – had coffee, built trust. ***Can you just get this issue settled motive***. When you are a politician looking for results you can miss that opportunity. Is a dynamic of this work
    - Imre: you need the capacity. Issues always expand. Like with a marathon – you need to think carefully about that.

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1. Note that notes were taken during the session by Rebecca Moryl, quotes are paraphrased. Apologies for any errors or misattributions, which are mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)