

Great Expectations

Citizen Voices on Philadelphia's Future

Turning good talk into real action

Harris Sokoloff, who as head of the Penn Project for Civic Engagement, has designed and led the civic dialogues for Great Expectations and the Central Delaware civic visioning project, reflects on those two experiences:

The presentation of the Civic Vision for the Central Delaware on Nov. 14 was a huge success, with more than 1,500 citizens attending the presentation and celebrating both the Vision as well as the civic engagement process that gave rise to it.

As Harris Steinberg of Penn Praxis, which wrote the document, noted, the work of citizens - their values and values based design principles - informed the work of the design professionals who pulled together the plan. Citizen work was the touchstone for the vision - grounding it in what Philadelphians' care about. Meanwhile, citizens who took part learned from the experts about what's possible on an urban waterfront..

The process was truly a blending of citizen and professional expertise.

Throughout the riverfront dialogues, we've learned a great deal about citizen interest and capacity for substantive engagement, including these points:

- Start by asking about what's important to citizens. We did this, both on the Central Waterfront and in Great Expectations. And we were greeted by an outpouring of ideas, which didn't surprise us. What did surprise us was the other response: over and over, people thanked us for asking. More than one participant said, "This is the first time I've ever been asked what I thought."
- Ask about what people know best - what they're expert in: their families, neighborhoods and lives and their work. So we started by asking what they like about where they live and what could be improved. In the process we learned a great deal about living in different parts of this great city - and we learned that there are more commonalities across neighborhoods than differences.
- Bring together people across neighborhoods, across formal lines of civic associations and city council districts. This diversity enriches the conversation, and helps people see that folks in other parts of the city are very much like them. When they talk across those boundaries, they discover common ground - places where their interests intersect. And they enlarge their own perspectives beyond their own back yards.
- Give them opportunities to learn together - from each other and from professionals. And after they hear from professionals, give citizens a chance to talk with each other about what they heard. Citizens come to this discussion with different background knowledge, so providing an expert presentation or two helps them have some information in common. And giving them time to talk about it afterward gives them a chance to figure out what that new information means - to turn that information into knowledge.
- Provide a structure for them to work substantively together. Conversation can turn into substantive dialogue when structured with an opening question and a goal, when there are groundrules for interacting, and when the structure is designed to get to the goal in a specified period of time. Having trained moderators/facilitators is important to keep things on track, to keep the dialogue and deliberation civil, though passionate.

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AUTHORS



Great Expectations is a civic engagement project brought to you by The Inquirer and the University of Pennsylvania. Check out the [Great Expectations Web site](#).

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[Tom Ferrick](#), a former Inquirer reporter, worked on the Great Expectations project throughout 2007 and into 2008.

Other members of the Editorial Board will be weighing in on the blog, as will Harris Sokoloff and Jodie Chester Lowe, members of the Great Expectations team.

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ABOUT

This page contains a single entry from the blog posted on **November 20, 2007 7:31 AM**.

The previous post in this blog was [How Life Imitates Baseball](#).

The next post in this blog is [Invitation: Comment on Citizens Agenda: Education and Knowledge Economy](#).

- Do something with what you hear. While citizens certainly enjoy coming together to talk about important issues -whether it be ideas for the central waterfront or issues in the election or about the future of the city they live in and love - conversation alone is not enough. When you bring citizens together to talk about something, show them the respect of doing something with what they say, and then telling them what you did with it. In the Central Waterfront, each citizen forum provided data that was used in the next round, and all of it became part of the larger planning process. And citizens were shown how their input was used. In the Great Expectation project, citizen input became the foundation for the "Challenges Ahead" series and then part of the Citizen-Driven Agenda.
- After you tell them what you heard, and while you are using what you heard, ask if you got it right. We did this in "feedback" sessions for the waterfront project, and will continue to do it as part of the implementation plan. And we are doing it for the Citizen-driven agenda - by holding a "Citizens Convention" to provide citizens with an opportunity to critique the agenda.

Throughout the Civic Vision for the Central Delaware and Great Expectations projects we have been strengthened by citizen interest in substantive engagement, and their capacity to engage in it. They brought passion to the work, and they bought some skepticism. Their skepticism has, I believe, been reduced by the quality of engagement, and by the quality the work produced so far, which in turn is based in no small part, on the citizen engagement.

The challenge now will be to remain engaged, to continue to be engaged to monitor the implementation of the Civic Vision and to monitor city progress on the Citizen-driven agenda. Based on past interest and on the quality of their engagement to date, we have great expectations for continuing citizen engagement in these and other projects.

Posted by Chris Satullo on November 20, 2007 7:31 AM | [Permalink](#)

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This was very good. And is still very good. This is what the better corporations do, and how they make the most use of their talent while smoothing the sharp edges of give and take.

This kind of engagement can't be simply voluntary in Philly. It's part of the zoning process, the bidding process, where any interested party is invited to comment during a "comment period."

We need more structured meetings, and that can be conducted by a professional consulting group hired by the city, with the results made available online, for further comment.

This is the complete opposite of the back room, closed door deals that marred decision making on matters the public trust.

Isn't skepticism warranted though, when Street's last efforts are to set up his close confidants in long term, closed proceeding bidding for city contracts worth millions, where only a few candidates compete and only those who are close to Street are recommended?

This is still considered an entitlement of public service. How can the ordinary person break that down, and demand changes?

Posted by Anonymous | [November 21, 2007 10:37 AM](#)

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After everything related to the FBI probe, Street STILL turned around and tried to fix the deal for PWRT to do simple city work for way more than it should cost.

Shouldn't there be some kind of prohibition of continuing to bid for city contracts after you, your company, or any of its members are involved in a federal investigation?

I think even the paper is tired of covering the Probe, but it's the gift that keeps giving.

Posted by Anonymous | [November 21, 2007 10:41 AM](#)

This has been an interesting year. After listening to the Riverfront presentation, I felt like it was obvious that our officials really don't understand the urban environment other than reacting to it. So now I'm wondering if this year's experiment with citizen engagement complemented by the work of experts will succeed in making it easier for officials to make better decisions--and reduce corruption. In other words, the city is corrupt because a lot of money flows through out and because wealthy interests are skillful in gaming that system (including its incompetencies) to their advantage. So the city is beset by greed, but also by lack of genuinely good information. So now I'm wondering if the citizen-engagement projects can help make it easier for officials to not give into corruption--pressures. Because it is so much better for your career (and the city) to make good decisions based on good information rather than go to jail because of what you did on the job.

Posted by MB | [November 21, 2007 1:36 PM](#)

This is a great outline of an effective approach to getting and keeping people engaged. Provide structure, listen, ask questions, listen, cross-pollinate people across all kinds of boundaries, listen, respect a wide range of opinions, listen, take action on what you hear, listen, offer feedback, listen some more. This approach is one that can be effective used within multiple settings and with children as well as adults. Thanks for putting it out there.

Posted by Sue Badeau | [November 28, 2007 4:02 PM](#)

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