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Harris Sokoloff | Working to build the next great city

Penn's Project for Civic Engagement is changing politics and policies in Philadelphia - and you can help

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the ^[1]

Voices of the Administration ^[2]

The Penn Project for Civic Engagement (PPCE) is built on this premise: "We dream about what we value, then work to turn those dreams into reality."

Put another way, the work of citizens in a democracy is to define the public interest and to build common ground for actions that will further the public interest.

PPCE has shown the power of that premise in high-profile ways: during last year's Philadelphia mayoral race, in the visioning process for the Central Delaware riverfront and in the current Big Canvas project about arts and culture.

For years, Philadelphia has been known as "Negadelphia," a place where sour cynicism choked off optimism and dreams. For years, we've been a city where back-room, pay-to-play politics left little room for citizens to dream or to say what they want. Those politics left citizens little choice other than to take strongly negative, adversarial positions; little space other than to say "no."

But there are ways to be involved and to have a positive impact on what happens around you.

Indeed, that's the work of Penn's Project for Civic Engagement. PPCE works within Penn and across the city and region to carry out projects that enable citizens to decide what they want for their community and to convey their dreams to policy makers in ways that will have an impact and make a difference.

Some examples:

The waterfront vision: We worked with another University partner, PennPraxis, in the School of Design, to develop a citizen-driven vision for Philadelphia's waterfront along seven miles of the Delaware River, from Allegheny Avenue to Oregon Avenue. More than 4,000 Philadelphians participated in forums, defining the goals and principles that directed

the design professionals who produced a riverfront vision that was at once practical and inspiring.

More than 1,000 Philadelphians cheered that vision when it was unveiled at the Pennsylvania Convention Center last fall. Mayor Nutter has now embraced the vision and used it as a basis for his call to move one of two planned casinos away from the riverfront.

Great Expectations: Last year, PPCE worked with The Philadelphia Inquirer to develop the Citizens Agenda.

This civic to-do list was based on input from more than 100 community forums PPCE led around the city in 2007.

The agenda, which covered 12 issues that citizens care about, was also embraced by Mayor Nutter, who asked Great Expectations to hold him accountable for progress on the agenda.

We'll do just that at a follow-up citizens convention early next year. PPCE has also worked with the city Budget Office and Managing Director's Office to gather citizen input about the new 311 service hotline, service performance standards and tough budget decisions.

The Big Canvas: This is a project which demonstrates that the work of PPCE is not just about reacting to crises. It can also involve looking over the horizon to figure out how to make best use of an asset - in this case the Philadelphia region's arts and culture riches.

Since July, The Big Canvas has been convening citizen forums around the region to come up with ideas for a strategy to support arts and culture in the region.

You can see the results of that work, distilled into four possible strategies, on the Web. Now, we're holding forums where participants talk through those four strategies and vote on which ones they like best.

We'll report the results to the region's cultural and political leaders at an event Dec. 6, letting them know which steps the region's taxpayers are most likely to support and discussing how to put those steps into action.

There's a forum this Sunday evening at Moore College of Art and Design in Center City, and three others in the following weeks. [Click here](#) for more information.

We'd love to see you there, making your voice heard and your vote count.

In these tough fiscal times, advocates of arts and culture need more than ever to speak with a clear, emphatic voice.

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This is the second in a series of monthly columns by Penn administrators and staff. To see the first column in the *Voices of the Administration* series, by President Amy Gutmann, [click here](#).

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Links:

[1] <http://thedp.com/node/752>

[2] <http://thedp.com/node/4042>