

Waiting to Contribute: The Key to Maximizing Citizen Participation

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One form of community organizing involves local citizens in collective action focused on issue. Issues emerge from tensions and contentions. They reflect the dissatisfaction or anger felt by local residents.

Often, “citizen participation” is used to indicate the number of dissatisfied people who act in public to resolve an issue. However, the number of people participating depends upon how many are strongly dissatisfied or very angry. Among this select number of people, there are many who are disaffected but unwilling to act in public. Therefore, “citizen participation” about most issues is necessarily limited to those who are both dissatisfied and are also willing to act in public arenas.*

There is another approach to community organizing that seeks participation on the basis of a citizen’s desire to contribute to the common good. Their motive for engaging is not about contention or issues. It is about their desire to share their own capacities for the common good.

In this form of organizing, the collective participation is based upon the identification and mobilization of the community building and problem-solving capacities of local residents and the associations they create to achieve the common good.

In this form of organizing, some neighbors visit each household on their block to find out which gifts, skills, interests and knowledge their neighbors value about themselves. Then they are asked whether they would be willing to share these capacities with their neighbors and/or their neighbor’s children.

One indication of the nature of local citizen capacities is the following “capacity inventory” completed on 20 blocks of the Jefferson Park neighborhood in Menasha, WI.

* This is not to say that this form of issue advocacy is not important. However, for the reasons indicated it is, by its nature, limited in the number of neighborhood people actually participating.



**Entire Jefferson Park
Neighborhood
220 households 330 neighbors
180 gift topics**

4 wheeling 4	Credit report reading 2	Jet skiing 2	Recycling 3
Accounting 12	Crochet 5	Job interviewing 11	Religion 10
Animals 40	Cross Stitch 2	Kayaking 13	Remodeling 6
Antiques/Antiquing 3	Current events 2	Knitting 10	Running 3
Art 23	Customer Service 5	Landscaping 8	Sailing 7
Aviation 5	Cuttin Trees 2	Languages and Culture 4	Safety 6
Baker 13	Dog 25	Lawn care 3	Science 3
Bartending 2	Drawing 4	Leadership skills 2	Scouting 3
Basic First Aid12	Drummer 2	Life lessons 5	Scrapbooking 3
Basketball 2	Early Child Development 4	Maintenance work 4	Seamstress 2
Bible 4	Education 9	Management skills 3	Self defense 3
Biking 12	Electrical 6	Massage 2	Self esteem 11
Birds 9	Electronic devise 4	Math 9	Sewing 10
Board/card /puzzles 20	Embroidery 3	Mechanical 3	Sewing/quilting 2
Boating 8	Entertainment 4	Mental Health 5	Sign Language 2
Bowling 8	Entrepreneur 7	Military 5	Singing 2
Builder 4	Environment 18	Millwright 2	Single Parenting 5
Bullying 6	Exercise 12	Motorcycles 10	Skiing 2
Business management 2	Family 10	Motivating people 6	Society issues 16
Buying a car 12	Family history 6	Music 23	Social Justice 6
Buying a house 2	Farming 4	Nail care 3	Spanish 5
Cake decorating 2	Fashion 2	Nursing 4	Special Needs 10
Calligraphy 4	Fishing 40	Nutrition 8	Sports 24
Campfire starting 14	Finances 3	Organizing 7	Swimming 5
Camping 21	Fixes 7	Outdoor activities 2	Taxes 3
Cancer 3	Football 6	Overcoming shyness 5	Technology 4
Canning 5	Gardening 65	Owens rental property 3	Tennis 4
Caring for Kids 31	Golf 12	People skills 4	Time Management 6
Car care 42 Cars 7	Grief 13	Packing to move 2	Travel 17
Care giving 13	Grilling 3	Painting 10	Tree care 6
Carpentry 7	Guitar 8	Photography 8	Truck Driving 2
Ceramics 2	Gymnastics 2	Piano 2	Typing 5
Checkbook management 10	Hair Styling 7	Planting 5	Vehicle Repairs 2
Children's Activities 8	Handyman 7	Plumber 3	Video games 6
Church 2	Health 20	Poetry 2	Viola 2
Cleaning 5	Helping 23	Politics, Government 10	Volleyball 2
Clothes shopping 2	Hiking 3	Promoting Menasha 6	Volunteering 8
Collecting 5	History 9	Property maintenance 8	Walking 11
College app. process 8	Home improvement 31	Public Speaking 9	Welding 5
Computer trouble shoot 15	Horses 3	Puzzles 4	Wood Working 43
Construction 12	How to say "no" 7	Quilting 7	Wrestling 2
Cooking 78	Human resources 3	Racing 2	Writing 8
Couponing 4	Hunting 21	Reading 23	Yard work 14
Crafting 52	Interior design 2	Real Estate 3	

***What interests do you share with your neighbors?
What others do you have to share?***



This table demonstrates both the number and nature of the neighbors with capacities they are willing to share. The numeric potential for participation and action around these capacities is much greater than the parallel issue-oriented inventories.

The capacity-oriented organizing has a second kind of civic engagement that it incorporates. These are the clubs, churches, organizations, groups and associations to which the local residents belong. These groups are usually smaller, face-to-face associations where the members do the work and they are not paid. They are the infrastructure for local engagement. An example of this infrastructure is the inventory of civic engagement among the associations in the rural community of Spring Green, WI. There, a group of residents found the following 62 associations with names. (This list does not include the numerous informal associations that do not have public names).

List of 62 Associations in Spring Green, Wisconsin

4PeteSake	River Valley Players
American Legion Post 253	River Valley Soccer Association
Badgerland Girl Scout Troop 2669	River Valley Stitchers
Bloomin' Buddies Garden Club	River Valley Youth Football Club
Bunco Babes	Rural Musicians Forum
Christ Lutheran Church	River Valley High School Alumni Band
Community Theater Association	River Valley High School Madrigal Choir & Jazz
Concerned Citizens of the River Valley	Vocal Group
Cornerstone Church of Spring Green	River Valley High School Senior Service Learning
Cub Scout Pack # 38 Spring Green	Class
Driftless Area Book Club	Skills USA
Future Farmers of America	Solstice Jazz Band
Friends of Governor Dodge State Park	Spring Green Area Arts Coalition
Friends of the Lower Wisconsin Riverway (FLOW)	Spring Green Area Chamber of Commerce
Friends of the Spring Green Community Library	Spring Green Area EMT District
Green Squared Building Association	Spring Green Area Fire Protection District
Greenway Manor Volunteers	Spring Green Area Historical Society
Habitat for Humanity	Spring Green Arts & Crafts Fair Committee
Knights of Columbus	Spring Green Cemetery Association
Knitters at Nina's	Spring Green Community Church
Kops for Kids	Spring Green Community Food Pantry
Mew Haven, Inc.	Spring Green Dog Park
Miracles on Hoof	Spring Green Dolphins
Mostly Mondays Poetry Society	Spring Green Farmers Market
Older & Wiser Land Stewards (OWLS)	Spring Green Film Club
Pineland Association	Spring Green Golf Club
River Valley Area Community Choir	Spring Green Lions Club
River Valley Boosters Association	Spring Green Literary Festival
River Valley Mom's Group	Spring Green Senior Citizens Club
River Valley Music Boosters	Stitch 'n Bitch
	Unity Chapel
	Wyoming Valley School Cultural Arts Center

When the small local research group had completed conducting this inventory, one member observed, "I never realized all these groups are here. Once you see them all you realize that if they disappeared our town would die."

Once this associational inventory was completed, the group interviewed the chair of each association. One set of the questions they asked involved showing the chairperson a list of civic functions that some associations perform. The following table shows a list of those functions. The associational leaders were asked which functions their group performed and which functions they would perform if asked.

Community Functions of 62 Associations in Spring Green, Wisconsin

Activity	Yes, Already Involved	Not Involved, Willing	Probably Willing	Probably Not	Uncertain
Welcome Newcomer	15	21	7	17	1
Beautification	14	8	25	0	3 slight, 1 possibility
Park & Recreation	14	12	7	22	1 possibility
Youth	34	4	8	14	0
Disabilities	22	16	6	17	0
Seniors	30	10	4	11	1 consider it
Homeless/Hungry	24	8	6	18	2
Natural Disasters	18	12	6	21	1
Arts & Culture	34	4	1	13	5
Families	30	8	3	18	0
Health, Phy. & Mental	28	7	4	20	1 maybe
ESL	0	6	6	47	1,1 maybe
Family/Child Abuse	7	12	6	33	2,1 maybe
Youth At Risk	12	10	4	30	2
Environment	17	10	5	23	2
History & Heritage	17	14	6	18	1 might
Recruit Teenagers	15	13	6	16	0

Column 1 in this chart indicates associations already involved in civic activity. Column 2 indicates associations that their leader said would engage in new civic functions if asked. For example, 15 associational leaders said their group was involved in welcoming newcomers. Leaders of 21 other associations said their group would engage in welcoming newcomers if asked. If the average size of these associations is 25 members, that means that in the Spring Green area of 6,000 people there are 525 potential welcomers representing 11% of the residents who are prepared to act in their community. Very few issues can activate that many people in civic engagement.

This community-based research indicates that there is great potential for wide-spread increases in civic engagement if the focus is on individual contributions and the associations those individuals create.

If we want to have much more citizen participation, the local residents and their associations need to be invited to contribute what they have that they value. Practically speaking, this invitation needs activating residents who take on two functions.

The first is the role of a connector. These are residents who identify the capacities of their neighbors and see the multiple possibilities of new productive activities when they are connected.

The second activator is the role of “precipitator” – neighbors who invite and connect the associations to undertake the new functions they have said they would participate in.

In every neighborhood, there are many people who have these connecting and precipitating skills. The basic community building and power creating practice is engaging and supporting local residents who will intentionally take on these functions.

A detailed guide to initiating these forms of creating widespread civic participation can be found in the publications of the ABCD institute at abcdinstitute.org. See Publications on Associations and Connecting Assets.

Finally, there is much current concern about the polarization among U.S. citizens. However, it is these same “polarized” people who are prepared to share with their neighbors in behalf of the common good. The positive possibility for America is to promote the sharing of capacities. This shared experience is critical in renewing our ability to see the value in each other and reasserting our power to create and problem solve together.