

# Beyond CIVILITY

## FROM PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT TO PROBLEM SOLVING

*"The best examples of democratic governance are those that engage a diverse assortment of people and institutions in learning more about community issues and working together to arrive at solutions."*

In recent years, questions regarding civility have come up again and again in conversations among America's city leaders.

The National League of Cities (NLC) has responded by providing resources and training in how to engage local residents more effectively in the work of "democratic governance." In the course of its research and other work on this topic, NLC has identified a number of roles and responsibilities for city leaders in promoting democratic governance.

Obviously, government does not bear the sole responsibility for doing this work. The term "governance" itself is meant to affirm an active role for residents, community organizations, business, the media, and others. The best examples of democratic governance are those that engage a diverse assortment of people and institutions in learning more about community issues and working together to arrive at solutions.

### DOING DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE RIGHT:

Seven principles to help city leaders build a culture of democratic governance in their communities:

1. MODEL CIVILITY
2. SHARPEN SKILLS
3. CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR INFORMED ENGAGEMENT
4. SUPPORT A CULTURE OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT
5. MAKE THE MOST OF TECHNOLOGY
6. INCLUDE EVERYBODY
7. MAKE IT LAST

### 1. MODEL CIVILITY

All too often, Americans sense that real progress on critical public issues is impossible because they see policy debates among elected leaders degenerate into electioneering, posturing, name calling, and worse.

While city leaders have little control over the conduct of the national debates that are often the ripest targets for voter anger, they can work to ensure that local and regional decision making is conducted in a civil and responsible manner. Not only will this help build residents' confidence in government's ability to address problems effectively, but it also will set the tone for civil discourse throughout the community and provide a model for other levels of government.

### 2. SHARPEN SKILLS

The work of promoting effective public engagement and problem solving may require city leaders to develop and refine new skills in areas from convening and facilitation to conflict resolution, mediation, and cultural competence (i.e., reaching out to diverse populations). In a recent NLC survey, about half of all city officials and top staff said that neither they nor their constituents have the skills and experience needed to carry out effective public engagement. Training can help even the most "natural" politicians develop and hone the core competencies they need.

### 3. CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR INFORMED ENGAGEMENT

Implement public engagement processes to mobilize residents to provide input and make decisions about important

issues facing their communities. Give residents a firsthand look at how government—and governance—works. People can learn the importance of compromise, and they can see how conflicting priorities and values often influence solutions. A growing number of cities have created neighborhood councils that engage residents to provide input on policy decisions. Other cities have convened residents in other ways to debate issues, develop priorities, and propose policies and strategies for addressing community needs. A key consideration: reaching beyond the “usual suspects” to engage and involve diverse groups of residents in local problem-solving efforts.

## 4. SUPPORT A CULTURE OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Citizenship is about more than voting. It is about fulfilling one's responsibilities as a neighbor and connecting with others in the community. Government can't solve community problems on its own. Residents can contribute their own time, energy, and resources to solving problems large and small. As municipal budgets continue to tighten, city leaders increasingly are turning to residents and community organizations to work with them to respond to critical community needs, strengthen and expand services, and build stronger communities. Cities of all sizes are finding ways to foster a strong culture of civic responsibility through volunteerism.

## 5. MAKE THE MOST OF TECHNOLOGY

The participatory nature of social media and web 2.0 technologies makes them natural platforms for engaging the public in discussing and solving community problems. The use of social media in particular can be an effective way to engage technologically savvy young people in the work of community problems. City leaders should know that residents are becoming increasingly comfortable with online forms of communications. In many respects, the internet is the new town hall, and city leaders can work with residents and others to make sure it delivers a form of dialogue that can help solve real problems.

## 6. INCLUDE EVERYBODY

Many cities are taking steps to expand the circle of public engagement to audiences that traditionally have not been involved. One action city leaders can consider is inviting young people to play a more meaningful role in local problem solving. Many cities are launching targeted efforts to engage people of color, including recent immigrants, in the work of democratic governance. Whether the focus is young people or people of color (or both), city leaders increasingly view these populations as an untapped resource that can bring new talent, knowledge, and insights to inform community efforts to solve problems.

## 7. MAKE IT LAST

A one-time convening or volunteer drive can deliver short-term results, but it is not enough to fully engage the public in solving a community's long-term problems. City leaders should work with their partners inside and outside of government to make public engagement an ongoing commu-

nity priority. The idea is to embed communitywide input and involvement into the process by which government and local residents address problems and opportunities and adopt priorities for the years ahead.

None of these principles stands on its own. For example, a city's efforts to promote informed engagement (#3) will surely involve outreach to diverse audiences (#6) and the effective use of technology (#5). NLC hopes that city leaders will consider the full range of activities covered in the following pages and how they support each other, and then weigh the best approaches for their communities.

Visit [www.nlc.org](http://www.nlc.org), for the full report and these additional civic engagement materials:

- Making Democracy Work: Municipal Officials' Views About Public Engagement (2010)
- Local Practices in Public Engagement (2010)
- City Government Promoting Civic Responsibility through Volunteerism (2010)
- Civic Engagement and Recent Immigrant Communities (2010)
- Research Brief on America's Cities: Municipal Officials' Views on Public Engagement: City Hall, the Public, the Media and Community Groups (2010)
- Authentic Youth Civic Engagement: A Guide for Municipal Leaders (2010)

This article was excerpted and printed with permission from the National League of Cities. 

THE LAW OFFICES OF  
**SHIFMAN & CARLSON, P.C.**

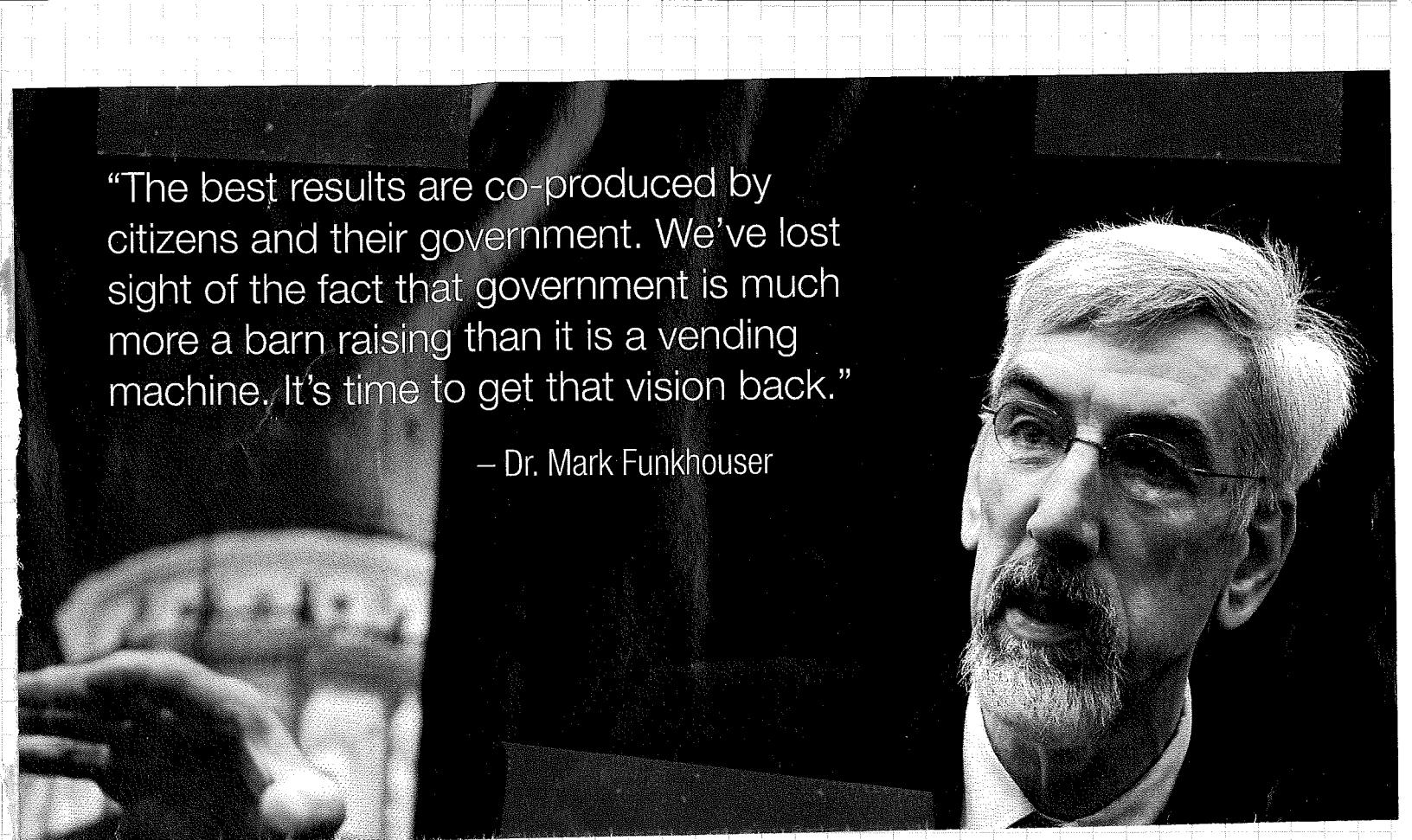
Representing Cities and School Districts  
for over 40 years.



**Experienced in:**  
General Counsel Services  
Bonds and Finance  
Discrimination  
Special Education Issues  
Elections  
Construction  
Employee Relations

**Location:**  
31700 Middlebelt Road  
Suite 126  
Farmington Hills, MI 48334  
Just north of Northwestern  
Highway on Middlebelt.

[www.shifmancarlsonlaw.com](http://www.shifmancarlsonlaw.com)  
800-799-8851 | 248-406-0620



"The best results are co-produced by citizens and their government. We've lost sight of the fact that government is much more a barn raising than it is a vending machine. It's time to get that vision back."

– Dr. Mark Funkhouser

*Governance.com*