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## **Are Civic Assemblies the Answer to our Toughest Problems?**

### **A Practitioner Guide for Local Government Leaders**

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Local governments across the country are facing a growing set of challenges that are complex, polarized, and resistant to resolution through traditional public engagement alone. While traditional approaches such as town halls, open houses, and surveys can be helpful for gathering input, they do little to foster shared understanding and can leave decision makers feeling stuck. Issues such as housing affordability, climate resilience, land use conflicts, childcare shortages, and infrastructure investment increasingly require not just public input, but public *judgment* – the ability for residents to weigh tradeoffs, learn together, and arrive at well-informed and broadly acceptable decisions. Civic assemblies – which have roots dating back to ancient Greece – are making a comeback as a tool to help communities do just that.

A civic assembly – sometimes referred to as a community assembly or a citizen assembly – brings together a demographically representative group of residents – typically selected through a lottery process – to learn about a public problem, deliberate with one another, and develop recommendations or actions. When well designed, assemblies can improve the quality of decision-making, reduce polarization, and strengthen public trust while complementing – not replacing – the authority of elected officials and professional managers.

This guide is intended for local government leaders who are curious about civic assemblies as a tool for solving a community’s stickiest and most controversial issues. Drawing on recent U.S. case examples, it outlines how various models operate, what elements matter most, and how the tool can be adapted for different communities.

## Civic Assemblies at a Glance

Civic assemblies are best suited for politically charged issues where **no decision has been reached** because the controversy is so high, offering a way to break the stalemate when traditional systems have failed.

**Representative selection and structured deliberation are key design**

**elements**; everyone has a chance to be selected, giving voice to those who might otherwise be drowned out by special interest groups or shut out of the process completely.

**Institutional commitment matters.** Assemblies are most effective when governing bodies clearly state how recommendations will be received and used.

**Assemblies are scalable.** Smaller jurisdictions can adapt the model without losing effectiveness, provided core design principles are preserved.

## Case Study: Montrose, Colorado – Addressing the Childcare Shortage Through Deliberative Democracy

**Jurisdiction size:** Small city/county (less than 50,000 residents)

**Issue:** Shortage of affordable, dependable, high-quality childcare

**Model:** Citizen’s Assembly using Unify America’s Sovereign Model of Deliberative Democracy

Montrose, Colorado faced a challenge common to many small communities: a persistent shortage of affordable, dependable, and high-quality childcare. The problem had already been well-documented through the Montrose County Childcare Needs Assessment (2021) and through ongoing work by the City of Montrose, Montrose County, Bright Futures, and the Uncompahgre Valley Alliance. Despite broad agreement that childcare was a critical barrier to workforce participation and economic stability, the issue remained difficult to solve through traditional policymaking alone.

In 2022, Unify America— a nonpartisan nonprofit focused on replacing political conflict with collaborative problem-solving—was seeking a municipality with 15,000–50,000 residents willing to pilot a deliberative democracy model. Montrose emerged as a strong candidate after months of relationship-building, focus meetings, and conversations with community leaders and residents. Through this exploratory phase, Unify America and local partners concluded that Montrose had both the readiness and civic culture necessary for deliberation. Childcare was selected as the focus issue because of its urgency, complexity, and the substantial groundwork already in place.

The deliberation was structured as a 12-week Citizen's Assembly following four phases: explore and research; recruit and convene; deliberate and engage; and report and pursue. Recruitment emphasized transparency and legitimacy. Mailers were sent to all households (approximately 20,000), applications were available in English and Spanish, and city and county logos appeared on recruitment materials to signal institutional support. A total of 222 residents applied to participate.

Delegates were selected through a live, public lottery using a non-profit software service called Panelot to ensure demographic representativeness by age, income, race and ethnicity, geography, and political party registration. Sixty-four delegates were selected, along with 24 alternates. The final 46 active participants in the assembly were demographically representative of the community as defined by the latest census benchmarks within a narrow margin. Households with children under 18 were intentionally overrepresented to ensure that those most affected by the issue had a strong voice.

Participants met in 90-minute online sessions over 12 weeks, with flexible scheduling, technology support, caregiving assistance, and compensation of up to \$390 per participant. Unify America staff conducted research, consulted experts, and synthesized more than 60 community-generated ideas into eight actionable proposals that the assembly deliberated and refined. The shared goal adopted by delegates was clear and outcome-oriented: *Every parent and guardian in Montrose shall have access to dependable, safe, affordable, and enriching childcare options so they can work, attend school, or otherwise contribute to the community.*

Actions were adopted by majority vote and intentionally limited to those the community could implement independently. While not all recommendations required formal government adoption, local institutions demonstrated support through resolutions, branding support, and collaboration. The Montrose Recreation District Board of Directors adopted a formal resolution supporting the assembly's recommendations to address the childcare shortage. The City and County allowed their logos to appear on official recruitment mailers signaling the collaboration.

The process reduced polarization, built trust, and produced broadly supported, community-owned solutions. For Montrose, the assembly demonstrated that even small jurisdictions can use structured deliberation to move beyond stalemate and toward actionable consensus.

## **Case Study: Fort Collins, Colorado – Civic Assembly Helps Determine Future Use of the Hughes Stadium Site**

**Jurisdiction size:** Mid-sized city (more than 170,000 residents)

**Issue:** Land Use of the former Hughes Stadium site

**Model:** Randomly selected civic assembly with professional facilitation

The Hughes Stadium site in Fort Collins, Colorado illustrates how civic assemblies can be used to resolve deeply contested, high-profile policy questions. Originally built in 1968 as Colorado State University (CSU)'s off-campus football stadium, the facility was demolished in 2018 after CSU constructed an on-campus stadium. Plans to sell the 164-acre site for residential development triggered community backlash to the point where a successful citizen-initiated petition in 2021 forced City Council to rezone the property as Public Open Lands and purchase the site from CSU. This left the site's future uncertain. The City acquired the site in June 2023 for \$12.5 million and began extensive public engagement. Despite years of surveys, meetings, and council deliberations, the community remained divided between advocates for full conservation and those supporting a multi-use approach that included trails and recreation amenities.

Concerned that traditional engagement had failed to resolve the conflict – and that not all voices had been heard – City Council approved the use of a civic assembly in a 3–2 vote, allocating \$150,000 for the process, and an additional \$60,000 was raised from private foundations. Twenty residents were selected and nineteen residents completed the assembly, selected through stratified random sampling to reflect Fort Collins demographics by age, council district, income, housing status, and education. Healthy Democracy, the American Public Trust, CSU's Center for Public Deliberation, and Local Policy Lab provided design and facilitation support.

The assembly was convened over two weekends in April and May 2025, during which delegates received balanced information, heard from experts and advocates, and deliberated on tradeoffs. The final recommendations supported a multi-use plan balancing natural area preservation with limited active recreation. While City Council did not commit to adopting the recommendations in advance, it did commit to taking them seriously.

Ultimately, City Council adopted the recommendations by Resolution and placed the assembly's multi-use recommendations before voters in the fall 2025 general election. The multi-use plan passed with more than two-thirds voter support, while a competing conservation-only measure was defeated at the ballot. Post-process evaluation by Colorado State University found high participant satisfaction, increased civic trust, and reported opinion change among delegates. Although citywide trust impacts were not formally measured, the election results demonstrated strong public legitimacy. For Fort

Collins, the civic assembly provided a credible pathway out of stalemate and helped translate deliberation into a decisive public mandate.

## **Case Study: Seattle, Washington – Community Assemblies for Climate and Economic Justice**

**Jurisdiction size:** Large city (more than 750,000 residents)

**Issue:** Climate resilience, clean energy transition, and economic equity

**Model:** Multiple assemblies led by trusted local organizations with relation-based recruitment through community networks

Using funds from a state-funded pilot project, the City of Seattle pursued community assemblies to address a persistent gap between public policy decision-making and the lived experiences of residents most impacted by climate change and economic inequity. Despite extensive public engagement requirements, traditional participation tools had consistently failed to elevate community voice in ways that meaningfully shaped outcomes. Policymakers recognized the need for a model that moved beyond feedback collection toward shared problem-solving.

Unlike randomly selected civic assemblies that closely match the community's demographics, this model prioritized lived experience and proximity to impact. Assemblies were anchored by trusted community-based organizations, including MLK Labor and the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle, which served as conveners and stewards of the process. Recruitment relied on relationship-based outreach through community networks rather than open calls alone, enabling participation from parents, workers, students, artists, and residents experiencing housing and food insecurity—groups typically underrepresented in formal civic processes.

The assemblies focused on climate resilience, community-level adaptation, and the development of an equitable clean energy economy capable of supporting generational wealth creation. Participants engaged in structured learning, deliberation, and negotiation of tradeoffs, supported by training and technical assistance from People's Economy Lab. The process emphasized collective understanding over adversarial debate and framed participants as policy designers rather than stakeholders reacting to predetermined options.

Government commitment distinguished this effort from many engagement initiatives. At the city level, Seattle's Green New Deal Oversight Board and Environmental Justice Committee committed to integrating assembly-generated recommendations into the One

Seattle Comprehensive Plan, a long-term framework guiding land use, infrastructure, and investment decisions. At the state level, the Washington State Legislature allocated \$2 million in the 2024 Supplemental Budget to pilot a statewide network of community assemblies focused on climate resilience and clean energy transition.

While long-term policy and trust outcomes are still being evaluated, early indicators suggest the process improved legitimacy, strengthened relationships between communities and institutions, and reduced polarization among participants. Importantly, the public investment signaled institutional confidence in community-led governance, helping shift assemblies from experimental engagement tools to durable elements of policymaking infrastructure. For larger jurisdictions, the Seattle experience illustrates how assemblies can be embedded into formal systems when there is clarity about purpose, authority, and follow-through.

## **Lessons Learned and Considerations**

### **When is a Civic Assembly a Good Fit?**

Civic assemblies tend to be most effective when addressing issues that are complex, cross-cutting, or politically polarized. They can also be useful in cases where prior engagement efforts have failed to produce consensus or legitimacy, or where there is no single “right” answer. Civic assemblies are most effective when there is a “silent middle” - a large group of people who aren’t on the extreme ends of the argument and are willing to listen. They can provide the common ground needed to reach a fair solution. Finally, civic assemblies should only be considered when the governing body is open to being informed and influenced by community input.

### **When a Civic Assembly May Not Be Appropriate**

Civic assemblies are generally not well suited for issues governed primarily by legal or regulatory mandates, matters with little discretionary authority, or decisions requiring rapid turnaround. Importantly, it’s not a good idea to consider a civic assembly when leadership already has a predetermined or favored outcome. Use of a civic assembly without genuine openness can undermine trust rather than build it.

In addition, it is not advisable to utilize a civic assembly when the outcome is a win-lose scenario, because nobody is willing to compromise if they know the other side getting what they want means they get nothing. Finally, if there is significant distrust amongst major stakeholders, a neutral convener is needed to bridge the gap.

## Key Elements for a Successful Assembly

While civic assemblies vary in form, the following elements are critical for success:

### 1. Purpose and Authority

Leaders should be explicit about what the assembly is being asked to do and how its recommendations will be used. An assembly can be used to inform a council's decision, shape a ballot measure, influence a comprehensive plan or budget, or recommend community-owned actions outside the government's role. Whatever the role, clarity of the task and how the recommendations will be used is key for building trust. Ambiguity about authority and purpose is one of the most common risks and leads to erosion of trust.

### 2. Representation Model

Assemblies generally fall into two categories: Randomly selected assemblies designed to reflect the broader population, and community-anchored assemblies designed to center lived experience and elevate underrepresented voices. Either approach can be effective; the choice should align with the policy question. For randomly selected assemblies, a process of stratified random sampling should be considered to ensure representation among whatever subgroups the community finds important. Consider free tools such as Panelot to help with the random selection process. For either category, be sure to select alternates ahead of time to buffer against participant dropouts.

### 3. Support and Accessibility

Effective assemblies require removing participation barriers. Common supports include stipends or hourly compensation, childcare assistance, technology access, and translation or interpretation services. It doesn't matter if all residents are technically eligible to participate if not all residents are practically able to do so.

### 4. Facilitation and Expertise

Neutral facilitation, balanced information, and clear ground rules are essential. Many jurisdictions partner with nonprofit or academic organizations to provide neutral facilitation, particularly for communities that are new to the process. For smaller jurisdictions unable to afford the expense of a full-service consultant, consider a scaled-back approach to cut costs without compromising the integrity of the process. There are consultants in the civic assembly facilitation space that are willing to help right-size the model to fit a jurisdiction's needs.

### 5. Resource Consideration

Civic assemblies require an upfront investment. Costs vary widely depending on scope, duration, facilitation support, and participant compensation. Smaller-scale models may cost tens of thousands of dollars; larger, multi-week processes with external facilitation and participant stipends can exceed \$100,000.

In addition to financial costs, assemblies require staff capacity to coordinate logistics, provide data, and follow through on implementation. Leaders should evaluate both fiscal and administrative readiness before launching a process.

## Conclusion

Civic assemblies are not a cure-all and should be considered a tool in an overall engagement strategy. They require time, resources, and institutional humility. However, when thoughtfully deployed, they can help communities move beyond polarization, improve decision quality, and rebuild trust in local governance.

For professional managers, the question is not whether civic assemblies replace existing tools, but when they add unique value. Used selectively and strategically, they can become a powerful addition to the local government toolkit.