

## **Diagnostic Democracy Dialogue**

Do the people rule in your community? Are the governors accountable to the governed? Do you need to build more democracy?

A well-informed citizenry needs to be able to ask and answer some preliminary questions. A democratic community needs to have answers that satisfy the residents.

### **Who runs your community?**

- ★ How many taxing bodies exist in your community or take money from it?
  - ★ How many people serve on each entity and who are they?
  - ★ How often are these folks elected?
  - ★ Are elected positions contested?
  - ★ Are candidates subject to any financial disclosure or campaign finance limitations?
  - ★ How much power is vested in appointed positions?
  - ★ Who controls the positions and salaries of appointed officials?
  - ★ Does the person in control of appointments pick from a broad range of applicants?
  - ★ What is the budget for each public body and where does the money come from?
  - ★ What are the services provided from each entity?
  - ★ How many people are on the payroll?
- ★ What is the percentage ratio of salaries to services/products rendered?
  - ★ Does each entity have a binding and enforceable ethics code?
  - ★ If so, who is covered by the code: appointed as well as elected officials?
  - ★ Family and friends of the officials?
  - ★ Is each entity subject to a local or state whistleblowing law to help uncover fraud and corruption?
  - ★ Does the public body have a standardized procurement procedure for goods and services?
  - ★ Is it followed for all purchases/contract awards?
  - ★ How many and what kinds of contracts are no-bid?
  - ★ Does the public body have any internal controls for auditing accounts?
  - ★ Is there an annual audit?
  - ★ Do the elected officials review the monthly accounts payable and report on them publicly?

- ★ Who is in charge of insurance for the public bodies and how often are the terms of insurance reviewed?
- ★ Who is responsible for making sure that all revenue bonds are being financed at the best possible rates?
- ★ Is there a public referendum or a public hearing required for taking on public debt?
- ★ Under what circumstances does the public body take a roll call vote?
- ★ How many constitute a quorum?

## **Public Access**

- ★ Are the meetings open to the public?
- ★ How often does the body meet?
- ★ Do the public bodies limit the frequency and use of executive or closed sessions?
- ★ How often do the governors review the minutes from executive or closed sessions to make these available to the public?
- ★ Do the public officials allow public comment at the beginning, end, and on all relevant matters of public concern?
- ★ Are their proceedings recorded verbatim by tape or film?
- ★ Are their proceedings available remotely, through cable access channels or on the Internet?
- ★ Are there any significant obstacles to public participation, like outrageous meeting times, a mayor who bullies people, retribution for civic participation, onerous requirements to sign-up for public comment?
- ★ Has the public body adopted any ordinance that stifles speech, limits public expression, or otherwise intimidates people from speaking?
- ★ Are there adequate seating arrangements and copies of considered materials for all, or are

members of the public made to feel like outsiders?

- ★ Does the press regularly cover all of the public bodies' meetings?
- ★ Does the press stay to the end of the meeting or do they get one story and leave?
- ★ Do the public bodies have real public hearings?
- ★ Is the agenda for the meeting posted for free, and well in advance of the meeting?
- ★ How frequently do surprise topics or major issues come up under "other business" on the agenda?
- ★ What about the committee or commission meetings; do they meet the above criteria?
- ★ Do your elected officials refer to the public as the audience or the citizenry?
- ★ Is it easy for people to meet with their elected officials?
- ★ Do the officials return phone calls or make themselves available for visits/meetings?
- ★ Is your town hall a public forum? Can anybody meet there?

## **Public Records**

- ★ Does your local body conform to open records requirements?
- ★ How long does the public body have to respond to a freedom of information request?
- ★ How long does the public body generally take to respond to your request?
- ★ How much does the public body charge for each page of information requested?
- ★ Does the public body make the document available for free inspection and in a timely manner?
- ★ Does the public body provide the information in other formats, for example, on computer disk?

- ★ Are you entitled to a fee waiver for your request?
- ★ How often does the public body grant fee waivers or reduce the fees for the request?
- ★ Does the body provide to you the minutes and any other materials that are distributed to the elected officials if you request them?
- ★ Does the body make these materials available on the Internet or electronically for free?
- ★ Is it easy to obtain draft ordinances, proposed development plans, and other contemplated legislation?

## **The Press**

- ★ How many papers serve your town or compete for readership/circulation?
- ★ Who owns the local paper(s)?
- ★ What are the ties between the owners and the political establishment covered by the paper(s)?
- ★ Who advertises in the local papers?
- ★ What is the letter to the editor policy?
- ★ Are your letters printed?
- ★ What are the rules for submitting a guest essay/column?
- ★ Does your paper let local officials run their columns on a regular basis?
- ★ Is the citizenry afforded the same opportunity?
- ★ Will the editor meet with you to discuss a past or future editorial?
- ★ Does the press provide accurate coverage?
- ★ How often are the reporters who cover your town rotated or "turned over?"
- ★ Does the reporter cover all of the public bodies?
- ★ Does the reporter come on time and stay for the entire meeting, frequently asking follow-

up questions of both the citizenry and the officials?

- ★ Will your paper print hostile letters to the editor that are critical of its coverage/reporting?
- ★ Does your paper cover citizen events or civic concerns adequately?
- ★ Do the articles reflect news and comments beyond standard press releases?
- ★ Does your paper engage in any investigative reporting?

## **The Public**

- ★ How many people show up for meetings of each public body?
- ★ Is there an "impartial" observer always there, like from the press or the League of Women Voters?
- ★ How many young people come to the meetings?
- ★ How many people regularly attend?
- ★ Are there new faces attending each time?
- ★ Does the public body stack the meetings with "cheerleaders" for the governing body?
- ★ Do all people feel welcome to make comment?
- ★ Is there always somebody who will make a comment?

# Fitness Plan for Democracy

## Take Stock of Your Civic Health

- ★ Am I and all eligible members of my family registered to vote at our current address?
- ★ Do I know about public resources available or organizations that work on issues relevant to me?

## Warm-up on a Daily Basis

- ★ Did I read the newspaper today?
- ★ Do I know what is going on in my world, locally, nationally, and internationally?
- ★ Did I make a phone call or send a letter for democracy today to my public officials?
- ★ To/for organizations in which I participate?
- ★ To my friends and associates?
- ★ To a radio show or a newspaper?
- ★ To mobilize anyone?

## Follow Proper Technique

- ★ Am I familiar with how to request government-held information?
- ★ Do I know about the Open Meetings Law? Did I go to any public meetings?
- ★ Do I have the facts? Have I read or heard information from more than one source? Have I looked at all sides?
- ★ Have I reached an educated opinion?
- ★ Do I have specific recommendations?
- ★ Do I know the effects of the actions I am recommending?

- ★ Do I know how my governments operate?
- ★ Have I made my opinions known to those responsible for the situation?
- ★ Have I volunteered publicly?
- ★ Have I told others about the issue?
- ★ Do I call in to radio programs?
- ★ Have I written a letter to the editor?
- ★ Have I volunteered on a cable access show?
- ★ Did I send e-mail?
- ★ Do I belong to any civic organizations?
- ★ Have I circulated or signed a petition?
- ★ Do I know how to put a question on the ballot?

## Build Endurance

- ★ Have I set an example for others?
- ★ Have I organized others to become active?
- ★ Have I made a contribution of time or money to organizations dedicated to my concerns?
- ★ Have I become or encouraged others to become a leader?

## Evaluation of Program

- ★ Have I followed through on my program?
- ★ Do I need to make revisions to make participating on a regular basis possible?
- ★ Am I making a contribution to my community, my country, my world?
- ★ Am I happier leading an active civic life?