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?