

# PUBLIC LIFE

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## Advocate

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# Top 10 issues to track in 2009

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Before citizens can be engaged and effectively deliberate over strategic options and matters of public policy, they need reliable, timely, balanced information. In that sense, it is important to track key challenges and opportunities facing Owensboro-Daviess County.

## Our list of top issues to track in 2009:



### New hospital proposal

- implications on rates and fees
- site issues (flood plain, nearby industrial uses, etc.)
- public infrastructure costs
- use of the abandoned campus



### Economic opportunities

- biotechnology niche
- transportation hub (air, rail, barge, highway)
- new incentive policy
- Carnegie Center (business accelerator)



### Downtown progress

- financing and administrative costs
- project phasing
- public involvement
- Executive Inn property, other projects outside the scope of the plan
- attracting private investment
- design standards

### Openness and transparency

- local officials pledge
- a higher cultural standard
- applications to governments, public agencies, commissions, leading private nonprofit organizations

### Nonprofit resource center

- integration into AACs's President's Place
- services, eligibility and policies
- staffing
- collaboration with Hager Endowment and colleges



### **A green community**

- expanded recycling
- mercury emissions
- technology at proposed area power plants
- green, attractive entryways and boulevards
- renewable energy models
- local foods movement
- factory farms



### **Shoring up the arts**

- debt retirement
- endowments
- sustainable operations
- Fund for the Arts
- Arts Academy

### **Jail challenges**

- exploding population
- overcrowding
- substance abuse programs
- budget issues: state reimbursements, youth



### **A healthy and caring community**

- early childhood education
- mentoring and adopt-a-school programs
- childhood obesity programs
- smoking cessation (particularly targeting pregnant women)
- medical and dental clinics/prenatal care
- earned income tax credit
- financial literacy, banking
- micro loans
- workforce training

### **Citizenship & leadership training**

- issue education
- importance of openness and transparency
- timely public engagement
- restoring trust
- restructured Leadership Owensboro
- collaboration among philanthropists

### National civic engagement initiative

The remarkable success of the “We the People” Town Meeting (Nov. 2007) was the result of a partnership between the Owensboro-Daviess County community and *AmericaSpeaks* of Washington DC. Now *AmericaSpeaks* is leading an effort to establish regular national discussions of a million or more Americans on vital public issues facing our nation: foreign policy, energy, health care, prison population, Social Security, special interest influence, jobs, taxes and more.

This *White House Office of Civic Engagement* would organize the

process through a non-partisan citizen group appointed by both parties of Congress. The plan recommends the use of trained facilitators and various methodologies: conversations in homes, workplaces and community centers; online discussions; and national town meetings linked by satellite.

We salute this latest initiative of *AmericaSpeaks* and hope that it will lead to applications for recurring civic engagement at the state and local level as well.

## Integrating civic engagement into community decision making

In our democratic process, there is value in any form of public participation – including the public input that occurred in connection with the recent financing proposal for the downtown Owensboro master plan. In that case, there were four opportunities for public comment following the two readings of proposed city and county government ordinances authorizing an increase in the insurance tax to finance the downtown plan.

However, civic engagement is more than public input. Dialogue does not occur during mandated public hearings. Deliberation is not an attempt to sell a proposal or justify a pre-established position.

Some citizens are intimidated by public speaking, particularly in packed rooms with emotional intensity. Many attendees are largely uninformed and are there to express outrage or protect a personal interest. A three-minute limit per speaker may be reasonable, but it often becomes an unruly contest between supporters and opponents to determine which group can generate the most applause following their statement.

During the most meaningful exercises in dialogue and deliberation, ground rules ensure civility. Small group discussions, led by experienced facilitators, create a comfortable, respectful setting. Participants are urged to keep an open mind and suspend judgment until they consider information from all perspectives. Unlike surveys and polls, dialogue and deliberation does not ask for spontaneous responses. There is a strong educational dimension to the experience.

The objective is to provide participants with:

- balanced, nonpartisan, reliable, easy-to-understand information, data and trends regarding the issue at hand
- information on apparent options and choices to address the matter
- an open and honest acknowledgment of the pros and cons associated with various options – including the costs, consequences and tradeoffs of the options
- an opportunity to deliberate with others, to share impressions of the options (or offer additional options)
- an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the views of others

...all *before* they are asked to come to judgment on an issue.

The process of dialogue and deliberation takes more time. Outcomes are not predictable. The process can require an extra effort to secure participants, particularly participants that reflect the demographic makeup of the community.

Certainly public officials should value what they hear at the coffee

shop or Sunday School. They should welcome the opinion of a neighbor in a conversation over the back yard fence. It’s good to poll the Kiwanis Club. They should track the letters, phone calls and email messages they receive on a particular issue.



But they should also recognize that special interests can be the force behind much of that input and the number of contacts they receive does not necessarily reflect the perspective of the broader public, a well-informed public, or the central objective of serving the common good. Visionary, indelible leaders often are those whose unpopular positions are ultimately affirmed.

Officials can choose to avoid tough decisions and defer controversial issues to referenda. Or they can use current technological capacity and poll by telephone or email on every vote.

Exercises in dialogue and deliberation allow officials to have a clearer sense of the collective judgment of well-informed citizens. And most important, civic engagement builds trust in public officials and public institutions and mutual respect between participants and their leaders.

So how do we integrate civic engagement (dialogue and deliberation) into community decision making?

#### 1. Agree on a credible facilitator

Establish a balanced, nonpartisan, capable administrative mechanism that has the trust and confidence of elected and appointed public officials.

#### 2. Target key projects and policies

Acknowledge when issues and challenges are significant enough to warrant public dialogue and deliberation. Certainly the downtown master plan, the new hospital proposal, the proposed economic development incentive plan, detention center challenges, Owensboro High School’s \$20 million expansion are examples of major projects and policies that should be (or should have been) considered for such an exercise.

Because dialogue and deliberation takes time and resources, the number of topics must be manageable.

### 3. Give it time, make it convenient

If at all possible, slow down. Give ample time for the public to become engaged and digest information. Provide multiple opportunities for participation and make it as convenient as possible.

### 4. Prepare materials collaboratively

Issue briefs, discussion guides, options, points pro and con should be prepared with input (if not buy-in) from all relevant parties to ensure objectivity.

### 5. Bring people together

Welcome citizens from all walks of life and all areas of the community, not just stakeholder groups (those directly affected by decisions and policies).

### 6. Adapt the methodology

Small group deliberative dialogue may be a favored format, but it may not always be practical. Other models may be appropriate in certain circumstances.

### 7. Track impact

Forums featuring dialogue and deliberation will typically conclude with a questionnaire or summation of conclusions. (The use of technology that allows for instant results is preferable.) The results should be shared with public officials, participants, media, and oth-

ers. The impact and applications should be systematically assessed.

### 8. Ensure sustainable resources

Resources will be needed to prepare educational materials and dialogue guides, to promote and host meetings and more.

Although still in a conceptual stage, a proposed Center for Civic Engagement could be a valuable resource to integrate meaningful dialogue and deliberation into the process of community decision making. Based at Owensboro Community and Technical College, the initiative could also involve Brescia University, Kentucky Wesleyan College, Western Kentucky University – Owensboro, Audubon Area Community Services, the Public Life Foundation and others.

#### SO WHAT IF OFFICIALS ARE CONVINCED THAT THE PUBLIC IS UNIFORMED?

In a letter to Richard Roscoe in 1820, Thomas Jefferson addressed this challenge:

*"I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society than the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education."*

Jefferson is saying that public leaders have the responsibility to educate, and keep educating, and keep educating.



### AmericaSpeaks founder to speak in Owensboro

Dr. Carolyn Lukensmeyer, founder of the organization that introduced the 21st Century Town Meeting methodology to Owensboro-Daviess County, will speak at the quarterly meeting of the "We the People" Initiative on March 12 (details to follow).

The local assembly occurred in November 2007 and attracted 650 participants from all walks of life and all areas of Owensboro-Daviess County. Participants crafted a community vision around five topics: education, economic-community development, environment, health and social services, and government.

In 1995, concerned about the deep partisan divide in Washington and the growing disconnection between citizens and government across the country, Carolyn launched AmericaSpeaks to develop new democratic practices that strengthen the citizen voice in public decision-making.

Under Carolyn's leadership, AmericaSpeaks has won numerous awards. Prior to founding AmericaSpeaks, she served as Consultant to the White House Chief of Staff in 1993-1994, including Vice President Al Gore's reinventing government task force. She also served as Chief of Staff to Governor Richard Celeste of Ohio from 1986-1991.

Carolyn earned a Ph.D. from Case Western Reserve University and completed postgraduate training at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland.

### "We the People" update

The "We the People" Initiative, established in early 2008 to facilitate the implementation of the recommendations that came forth from the "We the People" AmericaSpeaks 21st Century Town Meeting®, is developing another tool to foster communication between the public and community leadership.

Through the organization's web site ([www.wethepeopletownmeeting.org](http://www.wethepeopletownmeeting.org)), citizens can track the progress of various work groups, watch a video summary of the town meeting, participate in surveys and learn how to get involved. A blog is planned as well.

"We the People" volunteers are supporting student mentoring programs, the downtown master plan, expanded recycling, increased enrollment in the Kentucky-Children's Health Insurance Program (K-CHIP), openness and transparency in government, among many other initiatives.

### 2008 Annual Report

The foundation's 2008 Annual Report, *Pushing the People's Priorities*, is available on the foundation's web site: [www.plfo.org](http://www.plfo.org).

