Neighborhood planning is governed by a biased, unrepresentative system

By Patrick Sisson, Curbed, February 12, 2020

“The public meeting has become enshrined in this nation’s local politics as the conduit for the opinions of the common citizen and [as] an essential part of grassroots democracy.

“The problem of misrepresentation at public meetings, neighborhood councils, and other such hyper-localized public forums stems from their design.

Exclusionary

“Held at times of day that can make it hard for many people to attend without missing work, usually without day care options, and sometimes in locations not favorable to those with disabilities or who rely on transit, these meetings already exclude many groups before they even start. Then there’s the matter of format: Experts and officials typically sit behind a table and give speeches and make presentations, with a microphone set up to take comments from neighbors who can spare the time to spend hours waiting for a few minutes on the mic.

“ ‘The dynamic is just so unproductive,’ says Sara Aye, a designer and executive director of Greater Good Studio in Chicago, which focuses in part on improving public engagement.

“In 2018, Ayes and team at Greater Good Studio designed a public engagement plan for Raising Places, an initiative by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to enlist community members to design their own programs to promote healthy childhoods.

To make a meeting work, get started before the event

“Greater Good approached the project like organizers. They reached out to the community, held lots of one-on-one conversations, and enlisted community groups to take leadership roles and help with outreach. The nine-month outreach program focused first on diagnosing and understanding the issues, with weeks of events focused on observation, immersion, and the discussion of root causes with the community, as well as framing goals.

Greater Good Studio has also experimented with meetings that turn what’s normally a staged, one-at-a-time [public comment] conversation into something more freeform. ... In five California cities for the state government, Greater Good organized feedback events into something more akin to a science fair. Different stakeholders and local coalitions set up at tables spread around the room, and community members circulated around the stations all night, chatting and delivering feedback and having conversations.
Public meetings are broken. Here’s how to fix them.

Is local control a good idea in the first place?

“There’s another school of thought that says the best meeting may be not having a meeting at all. If the benefits of building certain projects are diffuse, says Boston [University’s Katherine] Einstein, it means assembling a supportive coalition at a neighborhood level may be too high a bar to set. Maybe the better process is setting more policy at the city or even state level, to allow more projects to move forward to benefit the community as a whole.

Read the full article here.