



# Livable Places Update

*Emerging Trends in Community Planning and Design*



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## *In This Issue:*

- [A New World of Public Participation: Discovering a People-Powered Future](#)
- [Participatory Budgeting: We the People at Work](#)
- [Vallejo Picks Its Priorities](#)
- [Apps for a New Era of Civic Engagement](#)
- [Low-Cost Demonstrations and Transformations](#)
- [Main-Street Transformation in Livingston](#)
- [The Power that Drives the Future](#)

## **A New World of Public Participation: Discovering a People-Powered Future**

In a world where real-time communication and feedback is now possible at the touch of a button, community members expect better opportunities to engage with their local government officials and their neighbors in more exciting and fulfilling ways.

Local governments across the nation are developing creative strategies and

using new tools and technologies to transform their services and achieve a deeper level of public participation and a stronger sense of civic ownership among residents and businesses on everything from prioritizing budget investments to making street repairs.

By opening up access to more information, cities and counties can create low-risk settings for innovation - allowing local entrepreneurs to develop apps that build awareness, improve local services, increase economic vitality and support ongoing public feedback.

"Public engagement," as President Obama has said, "enhances the government's effectiveness and improves the quality of its decisions."

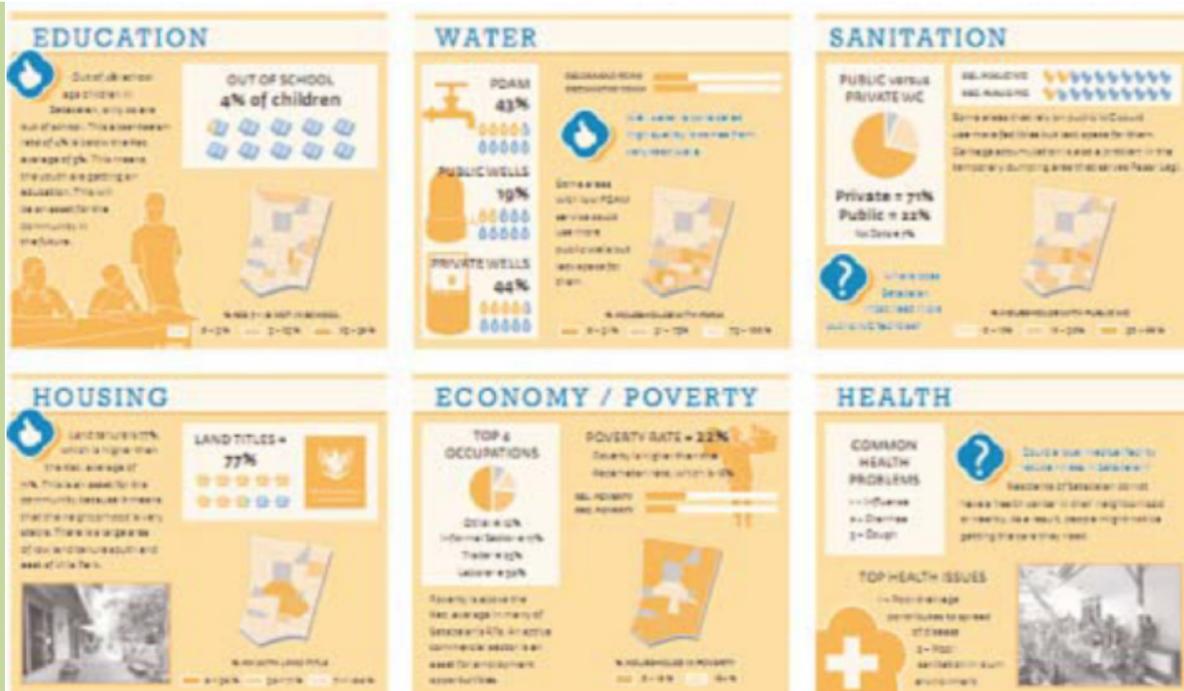
Planning processes that have long involved community members are taking it to the next level with imaginative high-tech and low-tech steps that broaden citizen input. Many cities across the country have launched pilot community-design techniques that make it easier for residents to participate in civic life and experience proposed community improvements in real time.

These initiatives show an evolution away from the traditional broadcast model of distributing information to a two-way exchange of communication that creates new feedback loops that can help residents take an active part in virtually every facet of governance. This new approach enables community members and encourages a deeper level of civic responsibility.

**Participatory Budgeting - We the People at Work:** The 21st-century citizen is accustomed to voting on everything from approving school bond measures to rating daily consumer experiences. Providing a practical opportunity for meaningful input can empower community members and increase the quality and depth of their involvement in local decision-making.

In "participatory budgeting," community members directly decide how to spend part of the city budget. This process was first developed in Brazil in 1989, and there are now over 1,500 participatory budgets around the world, according to the [Participatory Budgeting Project](#). Most of these initiatives operate at the municipal level, but participatory budgeting has also been used for counties, states, housing authorities, school districts, universities, regional coalitions and other public agencies.

**Vallejo Picks Its Priorities:** The City of Vallejo established the nation's first citywide participatory budgeting process in 2012, asking residents to decide how to spend a portion of its budget. In June 2013, as part of its FY 2013-2014 budget process, the City Council allocated approximately \$2.4 million for a second cycle of participatory budgeting choices - called "[PB Vallejo](#)."



*A series of interactive screens help residents understand the financial costs, community benefits and broader consequences of the various project choices they make.*

The process is straightforward: Vallejo residents and stakeholders develop project proposals, residents vote on the menu of projects, and the list of preferred projects that receive the most votes are submitted to the City Council for consideration.

A community steering committee oversees the participatory budgeting process, which includes designing the rules, planning public meetings, and conducting outreach with diverse groups throughout Vallejo. The committee - which includes individual residents and representatives from numerous local civic organizations - works with City staff to ensure that PB Vallejo is transparent, fair and inclusive.

Local officials hope this process will improve the city's infrastructure, help enhance public safety and quality of life for residents, and invigorate the spirit of community pride. The process is already helping to broaden participation and build a deeper level of involvement, public transparency and civic leadership among residents.

To learn more: [pbvallejo.org](http://pbvallejo.org) or read the case study in the LGC's updated [Public Participation Guidebook](#).

**Apps for a New Era of Civic Engagement:** Digital tools allow residents to provide input and feedback quickly and conveniently from their computers and smart phones. In communities with widespread Internet access and use, online technologies provide an excellent complement to face-to-face activity.

One of these tools is Nextdoor, which is being used in more than 4,000 communities across the U.S. to facilitate communication by allowing neighbors to share useful information and stay in touch. The recent expansion of the

[Nextdoor City Program](#) helps improve local government and constituent communication by providing a platform for agencies to share updates about crime, disaster plans and local events, and in turn receive current, on-the-ground information from residents.

A number of other apps have been developed to provide more convenient access to real-time information on everything from transit schedules to nearby parks and available parking spaces. These digital tools are also opening up new opportunities for residents to feed information back, democratizing civic leadership across a wide range of interests:

- *Real-Time Transportation Information*
  - [Street Bump](#) - Residents throughout the U.S. are using this app (originally a project of the Boston's Mayor's Office) to report road conditions, providing governments with current information to fix problems and plan long-term investments.
  - [Routesy](#) - Bay Area residents are using this app to find the closest transit stop with updated arrival predictions.
  - [SFpark](#) - San Francisco drivers can access immediate availability and prices for parking spaces on streets and in City garages.
- *Increased Access for Healthy, Active Living*
  - [SF Rec and Park Mobile App](#) - Users can easily find locations for parks, playgrounds, museums and recreation centers, along with descriptions and photos displayed on a GPS-enabled mobile map.
  - [PulsePoint](#) - San Ramon Valley uses an app to dispatch CPR-trained citizens to cardiac emergencies occurring nearby. The San Diego County Board of Supervisors also just approved the use of this app with the goal of cutting down response times. CPR being applied within three to five minutes of a heart attack's onset is often effective in lessening the damage caused. However, on average, emergency response time is often six minutes or longer, according to Supervisor Ron Roberts.
- *Democratizing City Services*
  - [Adopt-a-hydrant](#) - Boston residents are claiming responsibility for shoveling out fire hydrants after it snows through this app.
  - [SF 311](#) - San Francisco uses Facebook to integrate with their 311 service requests for convenient access.
- *Engaging Citizens in Local Budget Decisions*
  - [Look at Cook](#) - The Cook County, IL, budget transparency tool was created to provide residents with a clearer more accessible way to understand how their tax dollars are being spent.
- *Tracking Crime*
  - [Oakland](#) and [San Francisco](#) Crimespotting apps - These tools track and help people make sense of crime statistics in their cities through interactive maps of the locations and types of crime incidents.
- *Addressing Blight*

*"Clearly the faster first responders can get to the victim, the greater the opportunity for saving lives," San Diego County Supervisor Ron Roberts said in a recent ABC 10 news story.*

- [BlightStatus](#) - The City of New Orleans had 35,000 abandoned properties in 2012 and no system for tracking their restoration. Initial estimates calculated it would take three years and a multimillion-dollar budget to get one. In just months, however, the City - working with a Code for America team - launched BlightStatus. The app now gives residents up-to-date property info and saves the city millions.
- [LocalData](#) - Residents can report on conditions, such as sidewalk gaps or blighted properties, in their neighborhood.

Far from replacing personal interactions, these new approaches create vibrant villages - real and digital - that bring people together to tackle their community's important challenges and opportunities. Whether it's neighborhood crime trends, fun pop-up events or accurate information about when the next bus will really arrive, these participation tools equip citizens to better utilize city services and take community improvement into their own hands.

If you are interested in pursuing something similar in your community, [Code for America](#) has a year-long fellowship program where a team of digital developers, designers, researchers and product managers work alongside City staff to solve local challenges with new technology. Contact [luke@codeforamerica.org](mailto:luke@codeforamerica.org) or visit their [FAQ](#) page.

**Low-Cost Demonstrations and Transformations:** Community-led demonstration projects enable residents and other stakeholders to participate in relatively inexpensive temporary transformations to test and experience potential changes in their city environment. Sometimes referred to as "tactical urbanism" or simply "pilot projects," there is a growing number of examples across the nation. Sample projects include:

- Converting street edges to provide enhanced bikeways.
- Turning on-street parking spaces into outdoor seating areas ("parklets").
- Adding chairs and other street furniture on sidewalks or in parking spaces.
- Converting vacant lots to community gardens and play lots.
- Sprucing up blank walls and empty spaces with public art and colorful murals.

These experiments are often installed with local donated or recycled materials and volunteer labor. Ideas are tested out using chalk guns, temporary paint, movable planters and homemade chairs and benches. The process builds productive connections, creates sustained civic involvement, and helps citizens to take control of the places where they live, work and play. These physical projects create enriching opportunities for people to meet and share with their neighbors.

Temporary projects can help local officials, residents and business owners envision a new future for their civic spaces. City officials can use temporary zoning and provide technical guidance to ensure adequate safety and operations, allowing community members to "break the rules" to explore permanent regulatory changes. These grace periods help spark citizen imagination and innovation, while enabling officials to evaluate the success of practices before making more expensive, permanent changes.

**Main-Street Transformation in Livingston, CA:** Volunteers from the Local Government Commission and the [California Chapter of the Congress for the New Urbanism](#) (CNU Northern California) helped the City of Livingston in the San Joaquin Valley (Merced County) temporarily transform the town main street into a more walkable, bicycle-friendly place.

High-school students and local union carpenters constructed several "tactical urbanism" demonstration projects as part of a multi-design charrette, including a midblock crosswalk, a roundabout, sidewalk chairs, bicycle lanes and a pop-up cafe.



*Temporary markings helped Livingston see a midblock crosswalk, a roundabout and bike lanes.*



*Tactical urbanism on Main Street: Mockups of a pop-up cafe and street furniture at the Livingston charrette.*

Read more: "Pop Up City" and "Temporary Use Handbook" at [cudc.kent.edu/pop\\_up\\_city/](http://cudc.kent.edu/pop_up_city/) or [Project for Public Spaces](#), and check out the case study in the LGC's updated [public participation guidebook](#).

**The Power that Drives the Future:** Public participation is the cornerstone of a

flourishing democratic society and prosperous economy.

"Our strength is grounded in our people - individuals out there striving, working, making things happen," President Obama said earlier this month.

It is particularly important and rewarding to bring community members into the local planning process because the resulting decisions often have a direct and palpable effect on their daily lives.

The tools highlighted here provide only a quick snapshot of the many new and innovative ways for local governments to partner effectively with community members. The new edition of the LGC's [Participation Tools for Better Community Planning guidebook](#) provides a helpful overview of the many types of public participation tools, resources and inspiring success stories that can help communities work together to achieve better land-use and transportation planning.

These participation tools can give any community - large or small - a broad range of imaginative strategies to affirm its values, needs and aspirations. Harnessing the potential of public participation supplies the power for implementing sustainable, inclusive plans that reflect and advance the community's vision for the future.

"Sometimes it falls on a generation to be great. YOU can be that great generation. Let your greatness blossom." - Nelson Mandela

*Livable Places Update is published monthly as a membership service.  
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