



# Realizing the Potential Power of Indicators for Community Sustainability

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# A few starting premises . . .

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- We know how to address the “easy” problems
- Communities as chaotic systems
- More challenging, pervasive and systemic challenges need a different approach



# Role of Indicators

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- “In the 1990s, *a virtual social movement* has emerged, focused on community sustainability. . . .While there remain disagreements about how to define, much less to reach, a sustainable society, ***there seems to be agreement that indicators will play a key role.***” [my emphases] (Innes and Booher, 1999)
- Relatively little attention paid to how indicators will play a role or the necessary systems and capacities to be effective

# One Answer to “How?”

## – *Community Learning*

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- Indicators are just one element of a larger community change process.
- Indicators have the greatest effect where they are approached as tools for
  - ↳ effectively *raising questions*,
  - ↳ providing the basis for people to *deliberate*, and
  - ↳ to help communities come together to *develop shared meaning* about important issues.

# “Capacity to . . .

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- Learn before acting; and
- Act based on learning”

David Swain, JCCI (2002)

- Suggested addition: capacity to learn *together* before acting and to act *collaboratively* based on learning

↳ “civic infrastructure”



# Civic Infrastructure

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“The skills, formal and informal processes, practices and networks that communities use to make decisions and solve problems.”

National Civic League  
([www.ncl.org](http://www.ncl.org))

- *Developing a Collective Vision of Our Desired Future*
- *Working Together as a Community*
- *Fulfilling New Roles for Community Governance*
- *Strengthening Our Community's Ability to Solve Problems*



# Components of the Civic Index

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*What is Our Desired Future?  
Vision for the Community*

**Communities that deal successfully with the challenges they face have a clear sense of their past and a shared picture of what they want to become.**



# Components of the Civic Index

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## *New Roles for Community Governance*

- Citizens
- Local Government
- Non-Profits
- Businesses





# Components of the Civic Index

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*How Do We Work Together as a Community?*

- How Do We Bridge Our Diversity?
- How Do We Share Information?
- How Do We Reach Consensus?
- How Do We Cross Jurisdictional Lines?



# Components of the Civic Index

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*How Are We Strengthening Our Community's Ability to Solve Problems?*

- How Do We Educate Citizens To Meet Community Challenges?
- How Are We Building Community Leadership?
- How Do We Ensure We Learn from Our Experiences?

# “So you’ve got a set of indicators. Now what?!?”

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- Do the indicators measure outcomes that reflect collective community values?  
(Vision)
- Is there a “safe space,” supporting culture, and leadership in the community for
  - ↳ Sharing information and perspectives?
  - ↳ Collectively inquiring into what is and is not working to “move” the indicators?  
(Community’s Ability to Solve Problems)

# Now what?!? (continued)

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- Do citizens, government, business and non-profits
  - ↳ Engage each other in dialogue to collectively develop a shared understanding of the indicators?
  - ↳ Link their individual activities to community outcomes and take partial ownership for “moving” the indicators?
  - ↳ Use the indicators to identify issues in need of greater collective and collaborative attention?  
(New Roles; Working Together)

# When is civic infrastructure important?

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Only when

- There are multiple causes or forces affecting whether the indicator moves up or down; and/or
- There are multiple decision-makers within the community (and beyond) whose actions affect the indicator; and/or
- The old processes and solutions are not working to move the indicator in the desired direction.

*(When is civic infrastructure not important?!?)*



# The Potential Power of Indicators

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- Acting as a *catalyst* for collaborative learning and action
- To realize this potential, must have another set of capacities and systems for collaborative “learning-deciding-acting-learning” cycles