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City
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Operation Pufferfish

Building and Sustaining a Department of Neighborhoods
and Citizen Engagement in Lansing, Michigan



Image source: Springfield College Archives and Special Collections, public domain

“Nostalgia can fuel our future or be an anvil around our ankle that drowns us.”

- Andi Crawford, Director DNCE

Learning objectives

- Understand the **democratic goals of civic engagement**, including mobilizing resources and building relationships.
- Ask and answer **key design questions** for planning engagement efforts.
- See the breadth of options for civic engagement and make **strategic choices**.
- **Assess and troubleshoot** civic engagement efforts.

The Participation Pathways framework

Why are city leaders engaging residents in public problem solving?

What is the subject and scope of the engagement?

Who participates in the process?

How are engagement processes structured to achieve desired outcomes?

The background of the entire page is a dark red color with a white line-art map of a city grid. The grid consists of various rectangular blocks and streets, with some areas showing more complex, irregular shapes. The lines are thin and white, creating a high-contrast pattern against the red background.

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Exploration

Consider...

“Nostalgia can fuel our future or be an anvil around our ankle that drowns us.”

- What did Andi Crawford mean when she said this?
- What were the implications for engagement?

Andi Crawford,
Department of
Neighborhoods and
Citizen Engagement
Director



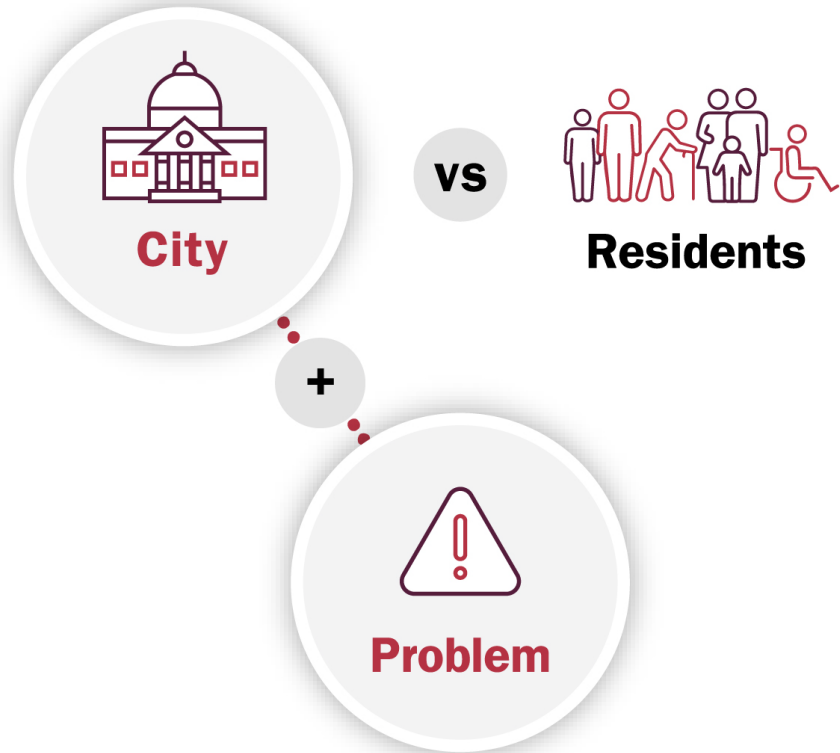
WHY



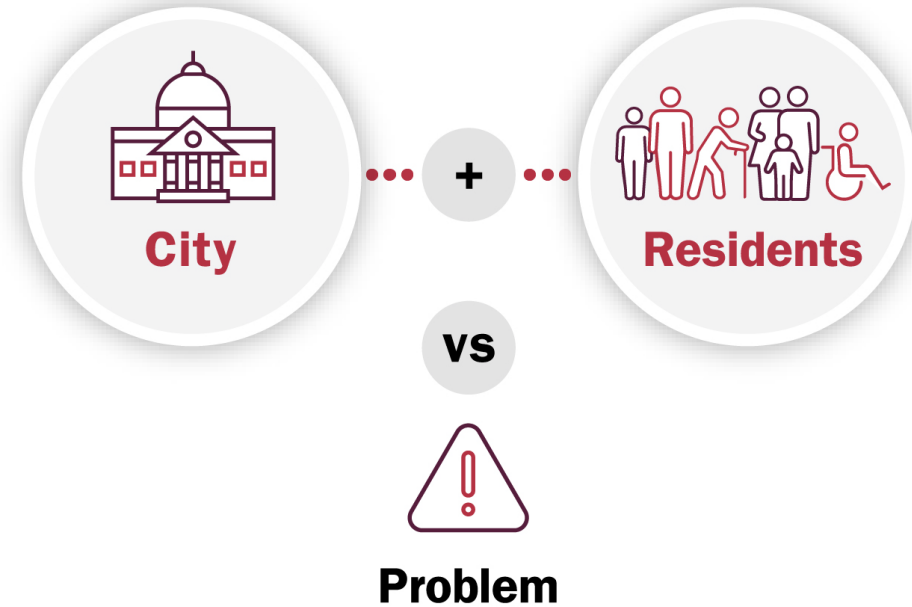
- *Why did Lansing need a Department of Neighborhoods and Citizen Engagement? (Or did it?)*
- *If the DNCE was the solution, what was the problem?*

Two paradigms of city governance

GOVERNMENT PARADIGM



PARTICIPATION PARADIGM

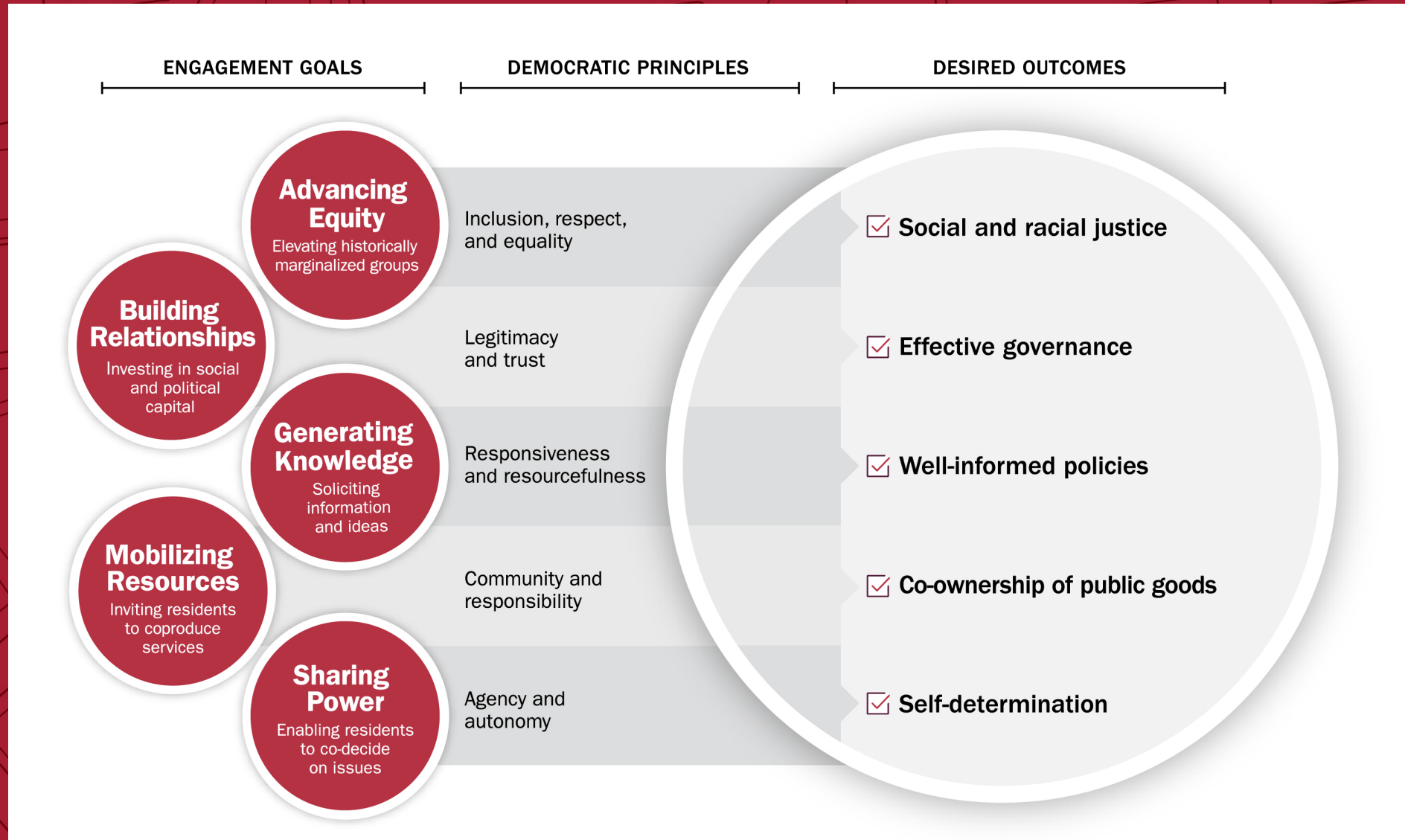


WHY

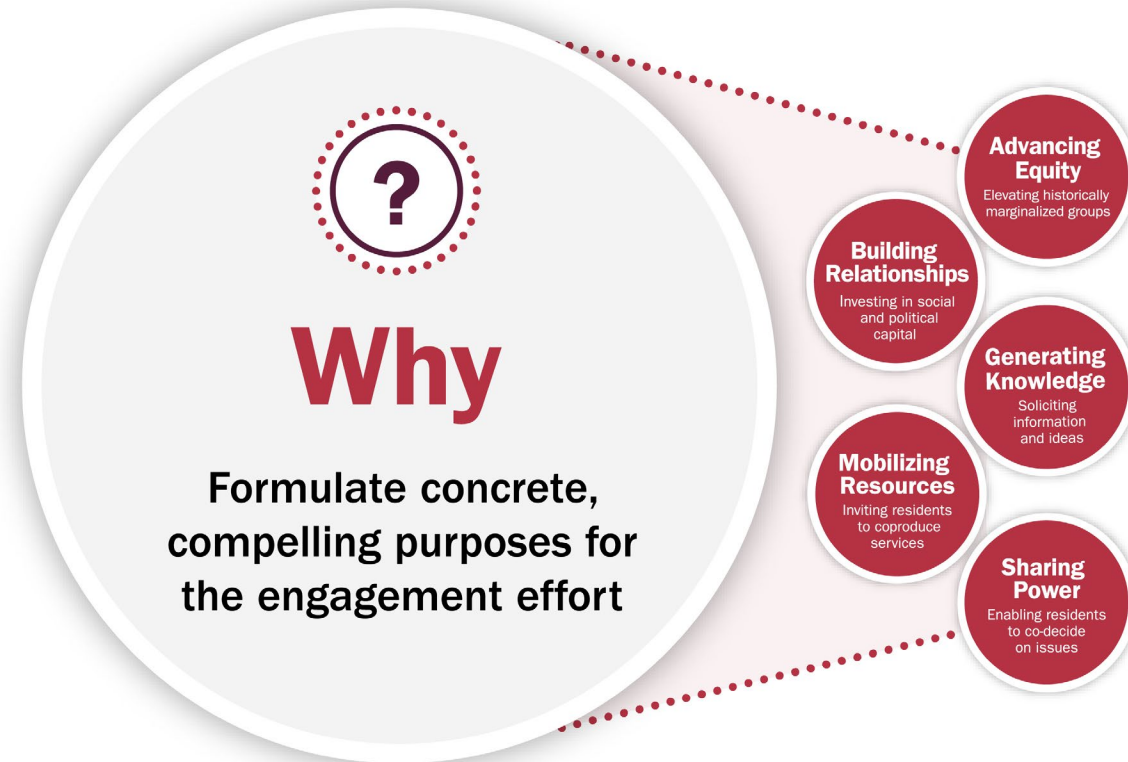


- *Was there a way for Lansing to achieve its objectives within the “government paradigm”?*

Five democratic goals of civic engagement



Which democratic goal(s) of engagement was the DNCE advancing?



Source: *City Leader Guide on Civic Engagement*, Gilman et al.

HOW



- *How did the DNCE advance these goals?*
- *What were its tools, mechanisms, and strategies?*
- *Were they effective?*

Participation Pathways

Four Key Design Questions





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Diagnosis

DNCE activities and initiatives

- Walking Wednesdays
- Citizens Academy
- Neighborhood grants
- Neighborhoods of focus
- Lansing SAVE (Office of Financial Empowerment)
- LOVE Lansing awards
- Participatory budgeting
- Neighborhood resource summits

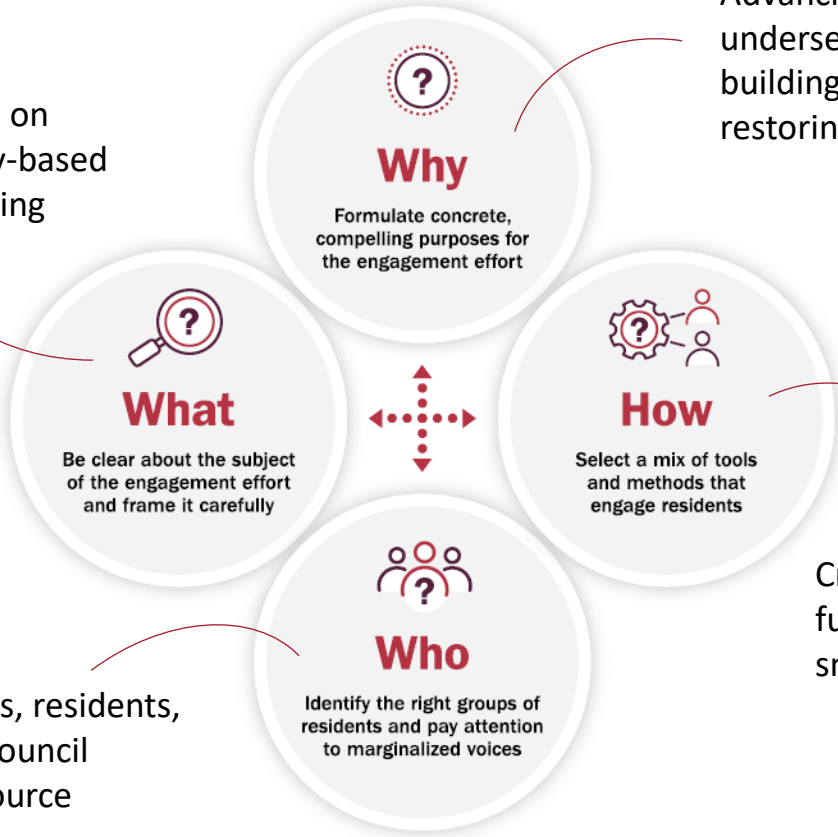
Consider (for one or two of the DNCE's initiatives)...

- *What were the city's goals? **Why** was civic engagement the solution?*
- ***What** was the topic and scope of the engagement? What did the city want the public to think, talk, and take action on?*
- ***Who** did the work of engagement—from the city and from the community?*
- ***How** did the city engage members of the public to help solve the problem?*

Neighborhoods of Focus

Hyper-local focus of resources on community needs, community-based activities, grants, and fundraising

Advancing equity in underserved neighborhoods, building relationships and restoring trust



Local businesses and churches, residents, neighborhood activists, city council members, neighborhood resource coordinators

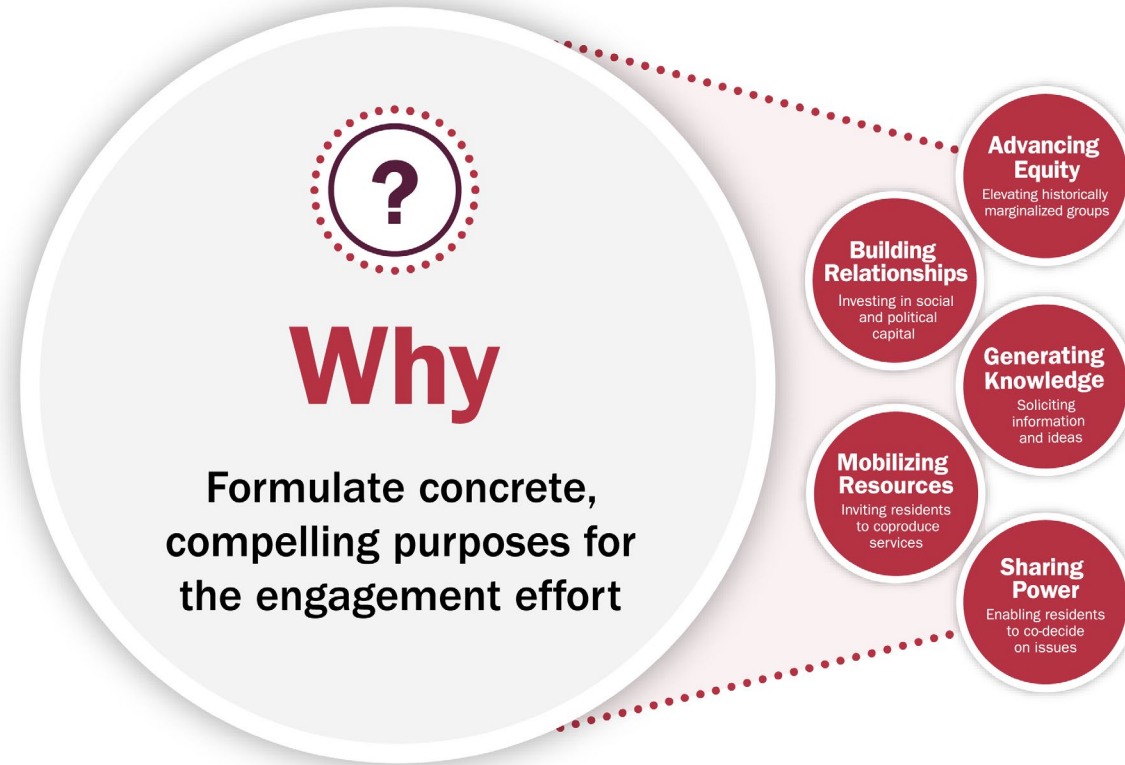
Creating events, supporting fundraising, establishing local small business association

Walking Wednesdays



Consider...

What were DeLisa Fountain's goals for the DNCE?



Source: [City of Lansing](#)

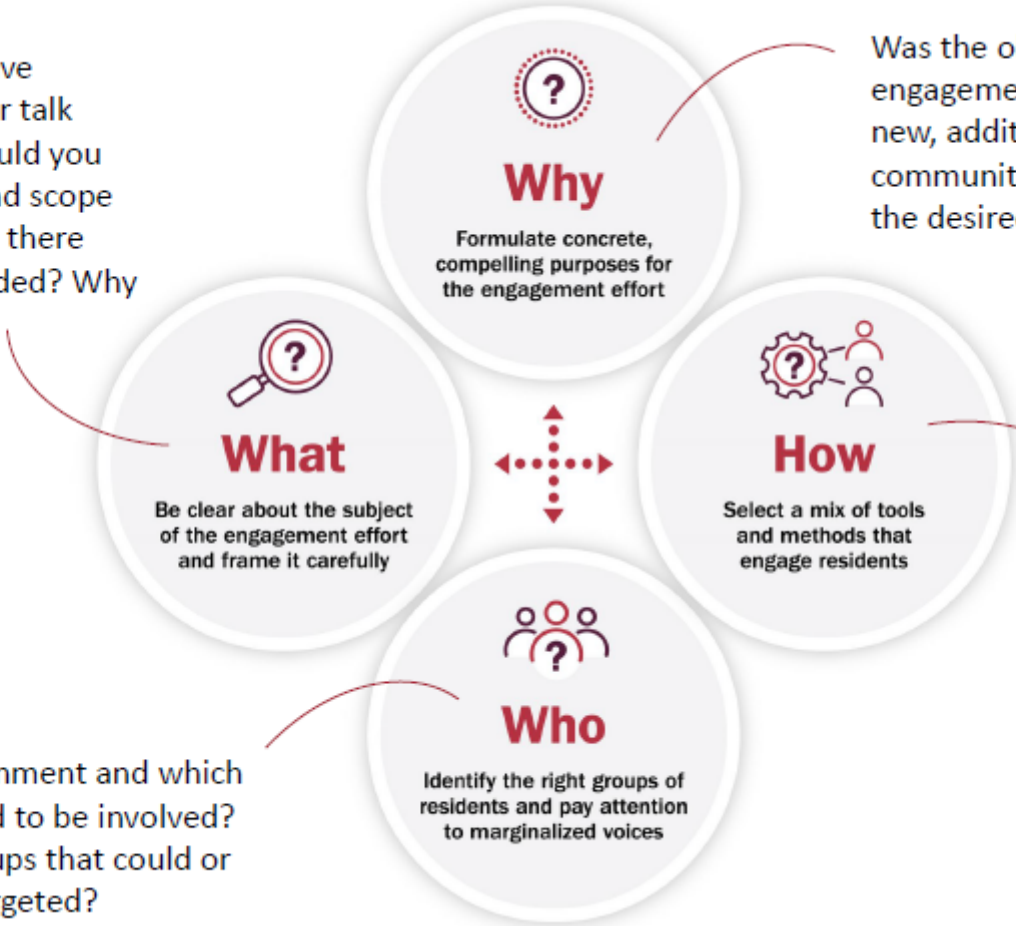
DeLisa Fountain,
Department of
Neighborhoods and
Citizen Engagement
Director

Discuss

- *How could DeLisa Fountain have used the DNCE to advance her “why”?*
- *What should she have kept, started, or stopped doing?*

Leading the DNCE into 2021

What issue(s) would you have wanted residents to think or talk about or work on? How would you have defined the subject and scope of their involvement? Were there issues you would have avoided? Why or why not?



Was the old motivation for civic engagement still relevant? Were there new, additional motivations to engage the community? If so, what would have been the desired outcomes?

What methods of engagement would you have used and what tools, platforms, or networks would you have leveraged?

Who from city government and which city residents needed to be involved? Were there new groups that could or should have been targeted?



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Epilogue

Winter-Spring 2021, first steps

- Temporarily dropped weekly newsletter to ease pressure, create some time and space for reflection
- Utilized Office of Financial Empowerment to push out information and resources for managing finances during the pandemic
- Prioritized Neighborhood Grants and neighborhood clean-up events in the spring to boost community spirit and cohesion

Building engagement capabilities: leveraging the DNCE



Source: Office of Senator Debbie Stabenow,
[CC BY 2.0](#)

“Every department had their own thing, and we really wanted to break down some of the silos.”

- Mayor Andy Schor

311 (non-emergency call center for city services) established within DNCE,
May 2022

Building engagement capabilities: adding arts (but don't call it DANCE!)



Image source: "Art District in Old Town Lansing Placemaking Photo," Michigan Municipal League, [CC BY-ND](#)

*"I want neighborhoods to
always stay front and
center."*

—DeLisa Fountain

Building engagement capabilities: responding to gun violence

LANSING STATE JOURNAL

May 27, 2021

A wave of gun violence is plaguing Lansing. Here's what city, community activists are doing about it.

Nine teens were charged with murder in the past year, more than the number charged in the preceding seven years combined



Image source: "Stop Gun Violence," photo by Terence Faircloth, art by Kyle Holbrook, CC BY-NC-ND

LANSING STATE JOURNAL

September 8, 2021

**Lansing is preventing youth
violence through
community programs**

DeLisa Fountain, guest writer

“There’s a department for that.”



Image source: *The Naturalist's Miscellany* (1789-1813) by George Shaw, public domain

*“I don't know what the future holds,
but I do know that,
for whatever situation arises,
we have a department that's ready
to navigate that situation.”*

- Mayor Schor

Takeaways

- There is no recipe for success in civic engagement but designing efforts with **clarity of purpose** and aligning goals, subjects, resident groups, and methods helps avoid disappointment.
- Leadership support (mayoral) is key to sustaining these efforts. Establishing **dedicated capacity** for civic engagement within city hall can be a foundation for sustained, effective engagement.
- There are often multiple motivations to engage residents. Thinking about **what success looks like** and identifying **meaningful metrics** can help clarify the goals both internally as a city and for residents.

Takeaways (cont.)

- Approaching civic engagement in a more systematic and intentional way can help **increase effectiveness** across the board, provided that the city continues to **learn, improve and adjust its approach** in response to changing circumstances, expectations, technologies, and demographics
- Civic engagement that provides **easy entry points** for residents (e.g., 311, neighborhood grants) can help build two-way trust.
- Using the Participation Pathways Framework can help **structure conversations** and design efforts as well as **diagnose what works well and what could be improved** in ongoing engagement efforts.

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This slide deck, accompanying the case study “Operation Pufferfish: Building and Sustaining a Department of Neighborhoods and Citizen Engagement in Lansing, Michigan,” was created as an instructional aid by the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative, a collaboration between Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard Business School, and Bloomberg Philanthropies. It is not intended to serve as an endorsement, source of primary data, or illustration of effective or ineffective management. HKS Case 2281.41. Copyright © 2024 President and Fellows of Harvard College. (Revised 9/2024.)



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