



Reimagining  
the Civic Commons

Investing with Intention: Our Four Outcomes

# Civic Engagement

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**Reimagining the Civic Commons** believes in the power of our shared public spaces to deliver social, economic and environmental benefits for more equitable and resilient communities. The four outcomes of **Civic Engagement, Socioeconomic Mixing, Environmental Sustainability and Value Creation** guide our approach to public space.

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# **Civic Engagement**

**Bringing  
People Into  
Public Life To  
Shape Their  
Community's  
Future**







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# Our Weakened Democracy

**Americans may be more disconnected from each other than ever. This is seen in many social and economic trends: With each passing year, we speak to our neighbors less and trust one another less. Faith in our civic institutions — government, business, the media — is declining. We are more likely to live in neighborhoods that are segregated by income, political persuasion and cultural beliefs. And while recent national elections have seen high levels of voter turnout, United States democracy has been challenged by internal and external actors, and polls show that most Americans are worried about the future of democracy.**

Some of this can be explained by our growing tendency to live our lives in private and with people like ourselves. We spend less time with neighbors, civic organizations and coworkers and more time commuting or working, often from home. Nearly 40% of U.S. adults employed full time report working more than 50 hours per week, and about 68% of workers drive alone to work. During the pandemic, the number of people working primarily from home — and away from social interactions with coworkers — tripled. Even social connections among neighbors have decreased in recent decades, with a full third of Americans never interacting with their neighbors at all. This results in a lack of time for civic life and fewer opportunities to engage with people of different backgrounds and opinions.

Without meaningful connection across economic, cultural and partisan differences, our ability to empathize and trust our fellow Americans and government institutions is undermined, and it becomes difficult to solve problems that require broad-based cooperation.



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The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated what U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy has called the “epidemic of loneliness.” Research demonstrates that loneliness and weak social connections are linked to negative health outcomes, including a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, depression and anxiety and even a reduction in life span. Addressing the loneliness epidemic could bring about longer, healthier lives while enhancing our economy, yet as a nation, we have committed few resources to such efforts.

When trust in one another and our institutions is weakened, our collective health falters, too. A Lancet study on the COVID-19 pandemic found that countries with higher levels of trust in government and interpersonal trust saw better health outcomes, including lower rates of COVID-19 infection. Although the U.S. is a world leader in health care infrastructure, the nation was ill-prepared for a pandemic in large part due to our growing crisis of distrust.

With democracy itself at stake, many solutions are needed. Public spaces such as parks, trails, libraries and community centers have the power to build trust in institutions and bring people of all backgrounds back into public life as stewards and advocates. They should be seen as critical components in our collective work to strengthen communities and support a more resilient democracy.

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# What Is Civic Engagement?

**Civic engagement happens when people of all backgrounds participate in public life and help shape their community's future. A thriving culture of civic engagement is associated with a robust sense of belonging and higher levels of stewardship, advocacy and trust.**

Civic engagement is about participation in civic life, and it spans well beyond official roles like elected office or jury duty. Voting, completing the census and advocating for an infrastructure improvement or a policy change are examples of civic engagement — as are acts of service such as participating in a park friends group or getting involved in the design, programming or maintenance of a local trail or community center.

When the outcome of civic engagement is central to how communities reinvent and manage public spaces, the results include deeper, longer-lasting support and a stronger sense of connection to place.





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# Why Civic Engagement Matters

**A civically engaged society is associated with a number of benefits that, given the challenges we are facing, are direly needed in the U.S. today. People who live in communities with robust local civic life trust one another more, share more resources and experience a greater sense of social cohesion. And when people have higher levels of trust, economies are bolstered and democracy is strengthened.**

Economies benefit from robust levels of interpersonal trust and trust in institutions. Research has demonstrated that a 15% increase in the belief that “most people can be trusted” adds a full percentage point to a nation’s economic growth each year. And yet levels of impersonal trust in the U.S. have hovered under 40% for years, compared with 60% and more in countries like Sweden and Norway.

Higher levels of trust are associated with effective, resilient democracies. When people trust their government, public institutions are better positioned to address major challenges, from income inequality to climate change. But over the last 60 years, Americans’ trust in institutions has plummeted, dropping from a robust 77% in 1964 to a concerning 24% in 2021.

Civic engagement is also an indicator of well-being and health. In fact, civic engagement can create a virtuous feedback loop in which healthier people participate in more civic activities, leading to greater health and well-being.



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Public spaces are critical for strengthening civil society and democracy. Multiple pieces of research over decades have found that social capital is higher in areas where people have access to high-quality, well-maintained public space, and more trust and social capital often lead to more civic engagement.

To support these positive impacts through public space, practitioners from planners to designers to community activists must approach their work with the outcome of civic engagement in mind. This often requires a paradigm shift in how communities plan, build and program their civic assets. It means seeing residents not only as consumers of civic assets but as active participants in creating and sustaining public space. And it means reimagining public processes to do more than gain feedback on project plans. Instead, practitioners should partner with communities in ways that nurture stewardship, advocacy and trust.



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# Why Now?

**There is strong evidence of the benefits of a civically engaged community. In today's environment of declining trust and a threatened democracy, reviving local public life is more important than ever.**

**Stronger local economies.** Research demonstrates that communities with more engaged residents often have less inequality, higher per-capita incomes and better long-term economic prospects.

**Reduced social isolation, resulting in improved health and well-being.** Active participation in civic life is associated with lower mortality rates and better physical and mental health. It can counter social isolation and the negative health outcomes associated with it.

**Less crime.** In communities where more people vote, volunteer and join local organizations, rates of crime tend to be lower.

**A more resilient democracy.** When people living in democracies trust their government more, their perceptions of the quality of their government are more positive — and democracy is more resilient.





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# Encouraging Civic Engagement

**To encourage broad civic participation, nurture trust and support a strengthened democracy through shared public spaces, new approaches are required. Included here are seven insights emerging from a growing community of practice focused on fostering civic engagement.**

## **Prototype and pilot**

People believe in changes they can see. By piloting smaller improvements and programming ideas, public space practitioners can cultivate trust by following through on promises and responding to local desires quickly.

Prototypes provide opportunities for residents to experience and assess changes before they become a permanent part of their neighborhood, and for practitioners to create a more democratic feedback loop. Rather than relying on loud voices at public meetings for input, practitioners can observe uses and patterns of behavior to better understand how people respond to changes in public space design or programming. In Lexington, Kentucky, a prototype of a splash pad over two summers helped build community and reestablish trust in a neighborhood accustomed to broken promises. (Read more about Lexington's work on page 20.)

This process enables residents to contribute more meaningfully to permanent plans and larger-scale programming decisions, nurturing trust and cultivating a continued culture of civic engagement.









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## **Reconsider the public meeting**

Public meetings are a cornerstone of the traditional community engagement process, but they often interfere with the goals of getting a diverse group of people meaningfully involved. In fact, research has shown that public meeting attendees are disproportionately white and disproportionately oppose public projects.

When the goal is to nurture a more civically active community, not just to receive formal input on a project, alternatives to the public meeting should be considered. Techniques such as neighborhood canvassing, tabling at community events and intercept surveys demonstrate a commitment to meeting people where they are and gathering diverse opinions and input. These approaches also recognize that people prefer to engage in different ways. Public meetings favor people who are comfortable with public speaking, familiar with bureaucratic language and processes, and can spare the time to attend. Expanding engagement to other places and practices brings in more voices and helps build a culture of civic engagement and trust.

## **Transform your assets into platforms for democracy**

In addition to providing recreation and opportunities for community and connection, public places can serve as platforms for democracy. Parks, libraries and other places can play host to civic events like voter registration drives and census completion, involving more people in the fabric of civic life and elevating the connection between civic space and civic action.

In Memphis, Tennessee, in 2020, civic commons partner Memphis River Parks Partnership gave its staff members assistance to register and time off to vote. They also shared information about census completion and voter registration at all visitor touch points, reaching park visitors when they were buying a coffee or renting a kayak. All together, nearly 1,000 new voters registered on the riverfront, and 100% of Partnership staff both voted and completed their census.



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### **Prioritize trust building, not transactions**

In many communities, decades of disinvestment, broken promises and “check-the-box”-style community engagement have eroded trust between residents and local institutions. Rebuilding trust — and spurring civic engagement — requires an approach to outreach that prioritizes authentic relationships and is not driven by external timelines like project plans and election cycles. In the words of Dan Rice, convener of Akron Civic Commons, “The trust is more important than the product.”

Building trust often means becoming a regular presence in the neighborhood, getting creative with your outreach and meeting neighbors where they are. In Detroit, Michigan, City staff and local nonprofit partners showed up regularly in the Fitzgerald neighborhood, hosting hot dog socials and bounce houses in vacant lots to connect with residents. This eventually led to the creation of Neighborhood HomeBase, a formerly vacant storefront on the main commercial corridor that was transformed into a public gathering space and shared office space. Today, Neighborhood HomeBase serves as a permanent hub for collaboration among neighbors and public and nonprofit partners working together on neighborhood revitalization.

### **Create a framework to align diverse interests around shared outcomes**

An innovative, strategic and community-led approach to the public realm can lead to a more engaged, resilient city. This kind of change requires not only shared goals but also a framework for achieving them.

Macon, Georgia, provides an example with the Macon Action Plan (MAP). This ambitious reimagining of Macon's urban core features a process designed to ensure MAP doesn't just sit on the shelf. Known as “democratized implementation,” Macon's approach engages local organizations, agencies and residents to actualize the vision of MAP 2.0, supporting them with the funding to do it and resulting in projects and innovations that the city or county government alone might not be able to accomplish in house. (Read more about Macon and MAP on page 28.)



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## Co-create and co-steward

People want to contribute and leave their mark. One way to support this is by expanding the role of community members from consumers of civic assets to active participants in the planning and programming of public space.

There are many ways to foster co-creation and co-stewardship, but it starts with identifying opportunities for neighbors to play an active role. In Akron, Ohio, residents became a part of the core Akron Civic Commons team, and a hyperlocal ambassador program was created for Akron's Summit Lake neighborhood. In Detroit, residents helped design and install a mural at a new park, partnering with a local artist. Philadelphia has hired local cleaning crews and engaged residents in the cleanup of their neighborhood parks. Project teams have also hired residents to join local research teams to collect data on their neighborhoods, awarded grants to neighbors to create public space programs and sponsored local stewardship programs.

## Measure your impact

When practitioners change their understanding of the role of public space, they can elevate civic engagement in their communities. They can also demonstrate a growing culture of engagement — and hold themselves accountable to their goals — using practical measurement tools.

Reimagining the Civic Commons has created a suite of measurement tools that anyone working in public space can access and use. For the outcome of civic engagement, measurement involves understanding the impact of public space investments on local public life, stewardship and advocacy, and trust. The measurement tools provide methods to collect data on key questions, including these: Are more people out and about in the neighborhood? Are acts of stewardship increasing? Do residents support more public spending on civic assets? Do site visitors and residents feel more trust?

For more information, download our publications [Measuring the Civic Commons](#) and [Measure What Matters: DIY Toolkit](#).





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# Civic Engagement in Action

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**Civic assets can serve as platforms to build trust and nurture a vibrant, resilient civic life. When designed, managed and programmed with intention, our shared public spaces can bring people back into public life to strengthen the fabric of their communities and fortify our democracy.**

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# Lexington Builds Trust Through Prototyping and Co-Creation

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Every summer in Lexington, Kentucky, the fountain at Thoroughbred Park downtown fills with kids splashing and playing. The fountain's water is untreated and deemed unsafe, but the fountain has long been the only free water play option in the area, so it draws many families on hot summer days.



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**In 2014, the City introduced plans to install a sprayground, or interactive water play area, at Charles Young Park, just a few blocks away. But residents who lived near the park, located in downtown's East End neighborhood, opposed the project. They had not been included in the decision and they expressed concern that the City would erase the history of Brig. Gen. Charles Young — West Point's first Black graduate and a Kentucky native — in favor of a new playground and sprayground.**

In the following years, the City reimagined its approach to engagement, prioritizing public life, relationships and building trust. They piloted smaller improvements and got the community, including local kids, meaningfully involved in a collaborative design process. And they partnered closely with Blue Grass Community Foundation and John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, whose advocacy and fundraising efforts were crucial from the start. As a result, today Charles Young Park has a new playground co-created with the community, and in 2022 the City broke ground on Splash!, downtown Lexington's first sprayground. Along the way, trust was built, minds were changed and residents began to see the City officials working on Splash! as partners in both improving their community for the future and honoring the stories of its past.

### **Prototyping and people-first design**

After neighbors rejected the City's original plans for a sprayground in Charles Young Park, the local team piloted a splash pad in the East End, with support from Blue Grass Community Foundation and Knight Foundation and in partnership with international design firm Gehl. The result was SplashJAM, a pop-up splash pad in an underused park near Thoroughbred Park and its popular fountain. When SplashJAM opened in summer 2016, it only worked some of the time and faced operational challenges. In spite of this, it was extraordinarily popular. Neighbors began asking if something permanent was in the works.



The prototype responded to community concerns while affirming a pent-up demand for free water play and high-quality public spaces. The team chose a shady area for the installation to protect kids from the sun, and they placed movable Adirondack chairs and sun umbrellas throughout the park for grown-ups. To improve safety and access, a four-way stop and crosswalks were added to slow nearby 45-mile-per-hour traffic.

During the pilot phase, data revealed that long-ignored Northeastern Park had started attracting people beyond those who were there for water play. The playground near the splash pad saw a 1,000% increase in use, and senior citizens socialized and played enthusiastic games of dominoes. Members of the neighborhood also began to take ownership of the park, handing out water and sunscreen, straightening the chairs and calling officials if anything was amiss. Before the pilot, some neighbors had expressed concerns about vandalism. Instead, the prototype inspired a culture of stewardship and care.

A second season of the prototype occurred at the same location in 2017, with improvements to the operations and design. By 2018, fundraising began in earnest for a permanent project.



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## Co-creating a new vision

Charles Young Park remained the City's preferred location for the permanent sprayground. The park already had plumbing and water service, and it borders four diverse neighborhoods as well as Town Branch Commons, a new park and trail system that connects to Lexington's newly renovated convention center, five existing urban parks and several neighborhoods adjacent to downtown.

In 2019, when City officials returned their attention to Charles Young Park, they emphasized collaboration, engaging the local community to co-create the sprayground and renovate an aging playground. Blue Grass Community Foundation and Knight Foundation continued championing the project, recognizing it as a key opportunity to advance equitable public spaces in Lexington. Funding from Knight Foundation Donor Advised Charitable Fund at Blue Grass Community Foundation catalyzed additional public and private funding. This early funding commitment provided confidence within the team and the community that the project would actually happen.

Recognizing kids as a key audience, the team used an innovative approach to get young people involved. They established the Colonel Club, a youth ambassador program comprised of about 12 second through sixth graders from the nearby William Wells Brown Elementary School. Under the leadership of Jill Wilson, a community member and the respected director of the community center at the school, the Colonel Club met regularly for social programming and design meetings and to learn about Charles Young. At meetups that included slip-and-slides and water balloon fights, young people sorted through images of amenities and drew their perfect playgrounds. This process of co-creation resulted in a general plan for the playground and sprayground before the design team was even hired. And because meetings often took place during the school day, participation was not dependent on parents providing transportation. A wider range of kids could and did take part.



**The new playground and soon-to-open sprayground at Charles Young Park were co-created with the community. Along the way, trust was built, minds were changed and residents began to see the City officials working on the project as partners.**



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To build support and buy-in among adults, the team focused on relationship building and addressing community concerns, including those about preserving the park's history. Established in 1934 when Kentucky's public spaces were segregated by race, Charles Young Community Center provided Lexington's Black community with indoor recreation opportunities previously accessible only to white people. The park is on the National Register of Historic Places and is important to the story of the East End. Community members expressed a desire to preserve the park's green open space as much as possible and to educate visitors about Charles Young and their neighborhood.

The project team responded by partnering with neighbors, the Charles Young Center's community advisory board and historic preservation staff on an iterative design process that built trust while making the proposed improvements tangible.



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“We would take spray paint and ask, ‘Are you comfortable with this size? Should we include this tree?’” said Monica Conrad, director of Lexington Parks & Recreation. “We were thoughtful and cautious, and we got very specific.” This led to design changes, including building storytelling about Charles Young into the renovations and protecting every existing tree.

### **The promise of trust**

Today, Charles Young Park has a new playground that’s twice as big as the old playground and was designed largely by neighborhood kids. It has become the number-one-visited park in downtown Lexington. And the sprayground is under construction, slated to open in 2023.

“The work underway at Charles Young Park is historic,” said Wilson. “The neighborhood kids are taking part in a project that is changing the face of this neighborhood, and someday they will proudly look back and say, ‘I did that. I made a difference.’”

Beyond the design changes, the team has witnessed changes in the relationship with neighboring communities. “Thanks to the open communication and relationships we built during this design process, the neighbors trust us enough to reach out and share ideas for programming or neighborhood improvements beyond the park’s boundary,” said Brandi Peacher, director of project management in the Office of Lexington Mayor Linda Gorton. “People were always vocal in this area, but now when they bring us questions or ideas, they trust we’ll listen to them and collaborate with them.”

By responding to community desires, making an idea tangible through a prototype and leading with co-creation, the Lexington team gained the community’s backing, spurred new trust and fostered civic engagement.

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# A Framework for Shared Vision and Action in Macon

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**Macon, Georgia, developed the Macon Action Plan (MAP) to stimulate investment and activity in the downtown core and surrounding neighborhoods. Unlike many master plans that involve community input but rely on government implementation, MAP centers the community in its implementation of projects. By doing so, they've created a fertile environment for sustained civic engagement.**





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**MAP's formal acknowledgment of the community's agency to conceive of and lead public projects is flipping the script of the typical comprehensive plan. As a result, community groups have installed civic infrastructure like bike racks, bus stop benches and street lighting. Macon residents have worked together to turn a downtown median into a park, host film festivals and create murals. And philanthropic institutions are getting involved, supporting community-led programs to activate and connect Macon's downtown.**

A key innovation of MAP is what the Macon team calls “democratized implementation.” This means Macon residents and community groups are active participants in planning, designing and building projects, and responsibility is dispersed among multiple organizations rather than centralized with the city government. “The magic of MAP is that it doesn't belong to anybody,” said Alex Morrison of the Macon-Bibb Urban Development Authority.

MAP was and is a collaborative effort, initiated by the Urban Development Authority, an independent public agency, with buy-in from the City, downtown booster organization NewTown Macon and local foundations. Grant-making has played a key role. Foundations aligned their grant-making to the plan, with grants such as Macon's Downtown Challenge grants, allowing the community to take ownership of programming and improvements that help achieve the goals outlined in MAP. The grants are managed by the Community Foundation of Central Georgia, with funding from the Peyton Anderson Foundation and John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

Democratized implementation has multiple benefits. It invites community leadership and activates civic engagement. It leverages the creativity, energy and intelligence of local residents, resulting in not only innovative ideas but faster results. Five years into the plan, Macon had accomplished more than 90% of its goals, paving the way for a robust second round of planning and more ambitious aspirations in 2020. According to Morrison, while the first plan focused on “just getting something going downtown,” the update asked, “How do we ensure the right things are happening?”

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## A focus on civic infrastructure

The original MAP started with a question: How can Macon better use existing public space and activate the downtown economy? The Ocmulgee Heritage Trail, which has the potential to connect downtown and its surrounding neighborhoods along and across its namesake river, was a central strategy in MAP. The plan prioritized completing the trail — with a focus on providing equitable, sustainable transportation and creating new opportunities for disinvested neighborhoods along its route. The trail connects some of Macon's large green spaces to its neighborhoods in new ways. Coupled with a broader focus on improved walkability and bikeability, MAP prioritizes the public right of way and encourages ongoing stewardship of community assets.

Residents and small businesses have taken it upon themselves to head up beautification projects and revitalization of public spaces like median parks (parks in the green space between opposing lanes of traffic). Projects such as a farmer's market and a vertical playground are two examples of the type of activation supported by challenge grants.

An invitation to public life is a key element of MAP, which prioritizes revitalizing public assets and reconnecting disconnected communities. For example, Cotton Avenue Plaza, in the heart of Macon's historic downtown, was envisioned in collaboration with the community. To create the plaza, the City had to remove a Confederate statue that had stood here for a century and permanently closed part of Cotton Avenue to motor vehicles. Located in a popular commercial district, the plaza is designed to be inclusive and welcoming while supporting local businesses. The plaza encourages increased foot traffic with features such as new landscaping, seating and inviting areas to walk, bike and socialize.





**With residents in the lead, Macon is creating a compelling model for civic improvement while fostering a culture of civic engagement.**



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## **Civic engagement for resilient neighborhoods**

MAP also invites neighborhoods to reclaim and reprogram community assets with the goal of mitigating divestment and vacancy. Pleasant Hill is a historically Black neighborhood that, like many Black neighborhoods, was cut off from the rest of the city due to highway construction in the 1960s. Half a century later, Pleasant Hill has significant vacancy and limited economic activity.

Through MAP, the Pleasant Hill community is rehabbing existing structures and helping improve pedestrian and bike connections between their neighborhood and other parts of the city. In addition, the reopened Booker T. Washington Community Center is becoming an anchor for community activity. The building is available as an all-purpose community building, providing meeting space and classrooms as well as recreation. In this way, it is becoming a place where neighbors can interact in planned and unplanned ways, encouraging civic participation and innovation.

“In Macon, our future is being driven by community input and engagement,” said Lynn Murphey, director for Knight Foundation's Macon program. “I'm proud of how our city's residents, businesses, community organizations, government and philanthropies came together to develop and activate the Macon Action Plan — our roadmap to a better Macon for all. As social investors, Knight Foundation is delighted to see the plan come to life.”

With residents in the lead and public and philanthropic institutions supporting community ideas and efforts, Macon is creating a compelling model for civic improvement while fostering a culture of civic engagement.

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