



Public Engagement in Culver City's Budget Process

A proposal from the National Civic League

The National Civic League is pleased to submit our proposal to help the City of Culver City bring rich public counsel into its decision-making. We believe we are uniquely positioned to make this effort valuable and successful, and we outline here two different approaches to fulfilling the city's goal:

- 1) A full civic assembly
- 2) Better Public Meetings (a lighter-weight, lower budget public engagement program that still includes key elements like sortition and deliberation).

Helping cities apply innovative practices has been the core work of the League throughout its history, and is the bread and butter of our current staff. Collectively, our current staff members have worked on grant-funded or fee-for-service public engagement projects with local governments in over 200 cities in 41 states. Our approach to democracy innovation combines research, training, and practice.

This is an extension of the League's historic role. Founded in 1894 by Teddy Roosevelt and Louis Brandeis, the Civic League championed the democracy innovations of the early 20th Century. Today, the League works with communities across the U.S. to understand, test, and disseminate the next generation of civic innovations. The League also maintains the Model City Charter, organizes the All-America City Awards, publishes the *National Civic Review*, maintains the Healthy Democracy Ecosystem Map, helps cities measure their civic engagement work, and supports an extensive national network of local elected, appointed, and civic leaders. No organization in America has a better understanding of the civic capacity of local governments.

In the last few years, we have been working to foster the innovative use of civic assemblies in the U.S., with the same blend of research, training, and practice. We partnered with FIDE-North America to organize a civic assembly school in Phoenix in 2024. We also incorporated Civic Genius, an organization that promotes and assists assemblies, as a

project of the League in 2024. We have written a number of essays and *National Civic Review* articles on assemblies.

While interest in assemblies has risen recently, there are very few organizations in North America that have actually organized them. The League is currently in the midst of organizing two significant civic assemblies in Raleigh, NC and Snohomish County, WA.

We are happy to answer any questions you have about our proposal. Whichever organization you choose to work with, the League stands ready to share the results of your efforts with our network and encourage other communities to follow your lead.

I. **Civic Assembly**

To make recommendations about how Culver City residents would like to engage with the budget process, we propose a four-day assembly over two weekends. During this time, 20 participants will learn about the budget process, existing opportunities for residents to give input, benefits and challenges of those opportunities, and innovative approaches to public engagement that could be beneficial.

Key Responsibilities

Project Management

The League would lead on the development of a project workplan, including process and invitation design; facilitation of a project workshop for city staff; and orienting experts and other presenters within the larger process.

Recruitment and Sortition

With input from city officials, we will draft and develop a list of randomly selected households that will receive the invitation. The League will monitor responses, select a representative sample of residents to participate, and notify selected residents.

Facilitation and Facilitator Training

League staff will serve as lead facilitators, and we will train local individuals with facilitation experience to support in this setting. Throughout the process, we will ensure that the process is fully transparent and any member of the public can follow along and deliberate for themselves. We will remain attuned to needs for any additional information on the topic that participants need or request.

Timeline

The city council’s idea to convene assembly members in time to observe the regular budget process in advance of the assembly is an exciting one. The timeline below reflects that design choice. One element we recommend considering, however, is participant retention, which can be challenging over a long period of time. There will also be a time crunch to select a representative group of residents; ideally there would be more time to educate the community about the assembly and its purpose, and ensure that groundwork is in place to run a successful sortition process. We are confident that participants could deliver high-quality recommendations through an assembly process even if they do not observe the full budget process in advance, so the council could consider beginning the invitation process in mid-April instead (our draft budget includes both options). There could be creative options that would enable the assembly members to understand the existing budget process without fully participating, such as engaging an academic expert and already-engaged residents to give a briefing.

November-December 2025	Mail 10,000 invitations to a random selection of residents. Monitor responses over the next four weeks.
January 2026	Select assembly members using sortition and notify them
February-June 2026	Assembly members observe the regular budget process Invite and confirm Advisory Committee and Information Committee members Confirm in-person meeting venue for deliberations
April 2026	Begin outreach to technical policy experts, community leaders, individuals with lived experience, and any other speakers
June 2026	Train local facilitators Public event to share information about the assembly with full community Social gathering for assembly participants
July 2026	Weekend 1: Learning and deliberations Weekend 2: Assembly writes recommendations

II. Better Public Meetings

The city may want to consider whether a civic assembly is the right tool to achieve its goals. Assemblies are an excellent tool for grappling with complex, contentious issues that require trade-offs. For a straightforward question about how residents would like to engage in the budget process, the city could use a related approach that incorporates sortition, comprehensive information sharing, and deliberation at a lower budget. It would also build the city staff's capacity to deploy democracy innovations long-term.

The League works frequently with cities that want to incorporate innovative public engagement into their decision-making, providing research, recommendations, and deliberative in-person programming that brings residents into the process. Three League projects illustrate what this programming could look like:

Boulder, CO partnered with the League to reimagine how public meetings – specifically its city council - could foster inclusion, trust, and more effective decision-making. In Boulder, extensive community research entailing a series of interviews and the use of a civic engagement scorecard in council chambers over four months revealed that public participation in the traditional council agenda was limited. The standard public comment lacked two-way communication. Residents often lacked clarity about how their input shaped outcomes. This led to the creation of the Community and Council Forum, a first-of-its-kind in the United States deliberative-style city council *study session* that replaced formal comment periods with facilitated roundtable discussions between council members and a balanced group of 20 residents, half randomly selected and half intentionally recruited from underrepresented communities. The format emphasized learning, mutual respect, and collaborative problem-solving, allowing participants and officials to deliberate on key issues such as economic vitality and equity. Post-event evaluations showed higher satisfaction, stronger trust, and tangible policy outcomes reflected in Boulder's Economic Vitality Strategic Plan, which now includes participatory budgeting, microloans, and inclusive business supports.

Mesa, AZ followed a similar process, working with city staff, residents, and local high school students to examine how public meetings could better reflect shared goals. Their research found that meeting debates were less focused on youth-centered outcomes. Youth rarely attended board meetings due to adults' behavior, and they felt intimidated by the public comment process. In response, Mesa Public School Governing Board ran a

series of engagement exercises led by the League, intended to create a throughline of participation before official board meetings, which ultimately led to youth voices on the agenda. A question of the month was circulated to the student body, the student council then selected a topic, and a Hacktivate process, like a mini-hackathon, with 15 teams of students, solved an issue around cellphone use in classrooms. The winners went on to present their solution before the elected school board. By integrating youth voices and reframing how dialogue occurs, the school board created a more constructive and balanced meeting environment that redirected attention toward shared problem-solving. Together, the Boulder and Mesa pilots demonstrate how deliberative meeting design can transform public comment from performative conflict into authentic, trust-building engagement that strengthens local democracy.

Currently, the League is working with the city of **Decatur, GA** on a groundbreaking Charter Review Commission. Decatur is the first U.S. city to use sortition to select members of a charter review commission, combining randomly selected residents with additional appointed members. The League has been a nationwide leader for over a hundred years in charter reform. The 9th edition of the model city charter encourages the institutionalization of equity and engagement. Through a fully facilitated process, the Decatur Charter Commission is set to reveal plans for an integrated engagement charter that includes reflections on budget engagement. Together, they will shape one of the most fundamental documents of local governance. The League has been there every step of the way to support comprehensive public engagement, ensure transparency, and uphold the integrity of the commission’s work.

Approaches like this build city government’s muscle around public engagement, and create foundational knowledge in the community about deliberation and sortition – making a future assembly easier to establish for an up-and-coming difficult issue.

Timeline

Proposed Better Public Meetings project within a condensed 6-month timeline:

January to March 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Conduct relevant interviews ● Implement the scorecard at commission meetings ● Write a preliminary summary of research findings
April 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Host a public forum to reflect on research and best practices of engagement, during the five stages of budgeting in Culver City, and how to adapt the phases for public engagement, including internal budget planning, presentation of the budget, budget hearings, budget adoption and implementation/follow-up

January to June 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person/digital observations of the budget cycle, i.e. budget requests, proposed budget, budget forums/hearings and budget adoption, etc. • Write a civic infrastructure scan of Budget engagement and recommendations • Meetings with city staff, and possibly present before the council for discussion
June 2026	<p>At a budget hearing, a pilot deliberative session held in place of public comments. Create the stages of good deliberation and facilitation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Learn about an issue together ○ Break out to discuss ○ Return to plenary to report out ○ Consider a live polling element – or some form of asynchronous digital opportunity to delegate ideas ○ Reflect on meeting location and the possibility of doing it somewhere where people are, depending on the community and the people we want to hear from <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • *A possibility of thinking about hosting an event with an affected community first, either by themselves and/or with council and staff members present, and then they show up to the public hearing meeting to present ideas.
July - August 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation

Proposed Resident Advisory Body selected by civic lottery adjacent to a 6-month Better Public Meetings pilot:

January to August 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • January - a Resident Advisory Body (RAB) is selected by civic lottery and provided with a virtual orientation training on the budget cycle and what to review • February - RAB members start attending budget sessions to observe them and report back on their experiences • March – RAB reviews early research findings and makes refinements and adjustments about what makes good engagement • April - co-hosts civic event • May/June – RAB presents with NCL before Council OR at the public forum • June/July RAB supports public hearing process as facilitators and with outreach
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> July/August – RAB supports evaluation via their own reflection in addition to meeting scorecards
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Proposed extended work for an additional 6-12 months:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Studying the possibility of participatory budgeting Examine the role of boards and commissions and neighborhood associations to support these efforts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work more closely with the City and other formal bodies on identifying needs and opportunities. Work to advance digital and in-person participation and deliberation before, during and after public engagement processes.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Run a survey in the city about engagement (how often people participate, where, what to help encourage more participation)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Produce a report on findings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Convene local organizations. Consider the connection between invented and invite spaces – overcoming the challenges of ‘nobody shows up’ and yet people are still participating in their own spaces. Work with the arts community to train and facilitate fun, gamestorming activities to generate and ideate about issues regarding the budget

Budget

Detailed budgets for a Civic Assembly and Better Public Meetings process are attached.

Our Team

The following personnel would be involved in this project:

Matt Leighninger directs the Center for Democracy Innovation at the National Civic League. He leads the Center’s work in strengthening civic infrastructure, using technology to scale engagement, and measuring the quality of participation and democracy. Over the last 30 years, Matt has worked with democracy-building efforts in over 100 communities in 41 states. He is the author, with Tina Nabatchi, of *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy*, the main textbook in the field. The Center currently leads “[Better Public Meetings](#),” which is helping cities transform their official interactions with residents, as well as the [Healthy Democracy Map](#) and other projects.

Jillian Youngblood is the executive director of Civic Genius, a program of the National Civic League. She has nearly 20 years of experience in politics, government, and strategic communications with a focus on deliberative democracy and solutions-oriented public

engagement. She is the creator of *It's Your America*, an experiential deliberative democracy workshop, and has worked on a number of projects to innovate constituent engagement in partnership with elected officials. On Capitol Hill, she was a lead staffer for the 9/11 Health and Compensation Act, and worked on issues related to health care, urban planning, and appropriations. Previously, she managed New York City's federal and state legislative portfolios on public health under the Bloomberg Administration, and was a consultant to numerous nonprofit and corporate clients across a range of public policy issues. Jillian is a frequent speaker and trainer on transformative civic engagement. She sits on the board of the Seattle City Club and is a 2024 fellow of the Henry M. Jackson Foundation.

Nick Vlahos is Deputy Director of the Center for Democracy Innovation at the League. He is a practitioner and researcher who is dedicated to advancing civic decision-making through innovative engagement methods that include digital platforms, local outreach, and inclusive public forums. Nick was a fellow at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance in Australia. He's worked on human-centered design initiatives to enhance engagement with underrepresented populations as part of the Bloomberg Philanthropy Innovation Team in Toronto. He also led community economic development and tenant engagement in a Toronto Community Housing Corporation revitalization community. Nick holds a PhD in political science.

Ibrahim Bazyan brings deep organizing and public engagement experience, from managing political campaigns to building coalitions – always with an eye toward opening up new perspectives, sparking purpose-driven dialogues, and spurring ongoing action. He manages *It's Your America*, an experiential deliberative democracy workshop, and is an experienced facilitator across social divides, and in partnership with elected officials and governments. He is a graduate of Case Western Reserve University with a Master's in Nonprofit Organizations and a Bachelor's in Psychology, serves on the board of the Arora Foundation and the advisory board of Tomorrow's Stars, and has consulted with many nonprofits through strategic initiatives.



Culver City Civic Assembly – Draft Budget

Prepared by the National Civic League

	With Budget Observation Phase	Without Budget Observation Phase
National Civic League Personnel	\$84,500	\$84,500
Process design	\$13,000	\$13,000
Project management	\$12,500	\$12,500
Facilitator training	\$5,000	\$5,000
Materials development	\$5,000	\$5,000
Coordinating third-party evaluation	\$2,500	\$2,500
Deliberation logistics	\$5,000	\$5,000
Civic lottery	\$12,000	\$12,000
Onboarding participants and alternates, assessing needs for participation, managing participant payments	\$12,500	\$12,500
Lead moderation	\$7,000	\$7,000
Designing and managing assembly briefing content, including recruitment and management of Information Committee	\$5,000	\$5,000
Media and public affairs outreach and management, including livestream access	\$5,000	\$5,000



Hard Costs		
Staff travel	\$10,000	\$10,000
Invitation mailing	\$10,000	\$10,000
Small group moderators	\$8,000	\$8,000
Pre-Assembly engagement stipends	\$8,000	\$0
Assembly stipends	\$12,000	\$12,000
Alternate participants – Pre-Assembly engagement stipends	\$5,000	\$0
Alternate participants – Start of Assembly stipends	\$750	\$750
Translation / Interpretation	\$10,000	\$10,000
Catering	\$7,000	\$7,000
Participant support (child/elder care, transportation)	\$2,250	\$2,250
Printing	\$3,000	\$3,000
Tech/AV support	\$1,000	\$1,000
Flex	\$1,500	\$1,500
TOTAL	\$163,000	\$150,000

Note: Venue provided in-kind by city



Better Public Meetings for Culver City – Draft Budget

Prepared by the National Civic League

Proposed Better Public Meetings project within a condensed 6-month timeline:

Conduct relevant interviews	\$12,000
Implement the scorecard at commission meetings	
Write a preliminary summary of research findings	
Host a public forum to reflect on research and best practices of engagement, during the five stages of budgeting in Culver City, and how to adapt the phases for public engagement, including internal budget planning, presentation of the budget, budget hearings, budget adoption and implementation/follow-up	\$10,000
In-person/digital observations of the budget cycle, i.e. budget requests, proposed budget, budget forums/hearings and budget adoption, etc.	\$10,000
Write a civic infrastructure scan of Budget engagement and recommendations	
Meetings with city staff, and possibly present before the council for discussion	
At a budget hearing, a pilot deliberative session held in place of public comments. Create the stages of good deliberation and facilitation:	\$12,000

*A possibility of thinking about hosting an event with an affected community first, either by themselves and/or with council and staff members present, and then they show up to the public hearing meeting to present ideas.	
Evaluation	\$6,000
Total	\$50,000

Proposed extended work for an additional 6-12 months:

Studying the possibility of participatory budgeting	
Examine the role of boards and commissions and neighborhood associations to support these efforts	\$5,000
Work more closely with the City and other formal bodies on identifying needs and opportunities. Work to advance digital and in-person participation and deliberation before, during and after public engagement processes.	\$6,000
Run a survey in the city about engagement (how often people participate, where, what to help encourage more participation)	\$5,000
Produce a report on findings	\$7,000
Convene local organizations. Consider the connection between invented and invite spaces – overcoming the challenges of ‘nobody shows up’ and yet people are still participating in their own spaces. Work with the arts community to train and facilitate fun, gamestorming activities to generate and ideate about issues regarding the budget	\$12,000