

Opinions

FORUM

All views count at regional Citizens Forum

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On June 14th, something unprecedented occurred in the region that comprises the 20 towns of Greater New Haven and the Naugatuck Valley.

Not since ancient Athens has a community made a commitment to involving a randomly-selected microcosm of citizens in an ongoing process of public consultation. Last year, the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven and the League of Women Voters of Connecticut held a regional dialogue based on the concept of a Deliberative Poll.

This technique, invented by Stanford Professor James Fishkin, brings a randomly-selected group of citizens together to talk about a policy question, and to question a panel of experts. A modest stipend is offered. The background materials provide a balanced and non-partisan account of various possible perspectives on the issue. Participants have a chance to talk to fellow citizens of the region who bring a different set of experiences and concerns to the table. The survey that the participants complete at the end of the dialogue reflects considered and informed judgments rather than the top of the head responses registered by regular opinion polls. On the basis of last year's experience — which brought a microcosm of the region together to discuss the future of Tweed- New Haven Airport and the possibility of sharing taxes on new commercial property across town boundaries — the community foundation and the league decided to initiate an annual event, the Citizens Forum.

The goals of the Forum are to give citizens from different parts of the region and different walks of life a chance to learn about and appreciate each others' perspectives; to promote civic engagement by a broader group of citizens; to give all citizens the sense that their views matter; and to challenge elected officials and policymakers to reconsider their assumptions about what kinds of policies can secure public support.

The nearly 200 residents of the region who assembled on June 14th for a day were randomly assigned to discuss one of two timely issues that are currently being debated by policymakers: the needs of 3- and 4-year olds, and the financing of local government services.

All had received background materials on both issues, and they were given a chance to express their views on both questions on the final survey.

The results were eye-opening. (Details are available at www.cfgnh.org.) Virtually everyone thinks change is required, both to meet the needs of preschool-aged children (96 percent) and to finance local services (98 percent). When asked to choose among specific strategies for meeting the needs of 3- and 4-year olds, 35 percent of the entire group opted for government provision of free preschool for all children, while 34 percent preferred expansion of the existing school readiness and Head Start programs to accommodate all children from poor families who wish to attend preschool. Those who actually discussed preschool were significantly more likely (43 percent) to choose the universal option.

On the question of financing local services, 69 percent of the forum participants disagreed with the statement that "the current system of taxation enables towns to cover the services they need." Only 53 percent expressed this view before reading the background materials and participating in the forum.

More than half of the citizens opted for regional cooperation as the best method for addressing the challenge of financing local government services. Half of those who chose the regional option said that they thought regions should engage both in regional planning/service delivery and in levying regional taxes. Twenty-five percent of the participants opted for increased state aid to municipalities, while 15 percent thought that spending growth should be limited to the rate of growth in taxable property. Whatever strategy they supported, the citizens emphasized that towns should control the use of the funds.

The detailed results are being shared with local and state elected officials and policymakers by the Regional Growth Partnership, Connecticut Conference of Municipalities, Connecticut Association for Human Services, and Connecticut Policy and Economic Council.

Some decision-makers heard what the forum participants had to say in person. Guilford First Selectman Carl Balestracci, state Sen. William Aniskovich and Assistant Commissioner of Education George Coleman participated on panels.

Mayor John DeStefano Jr. of New Haven and his counterparts from Hamden, North Haven, Guilford, West Haven, Cheshire, and Bethany co-hosted a reception immediately after the forum.

A number of local elected officials and the Volunteer Action Centers in Greater New Haven and the Valley will encourage citizens to continue the discussion and to stay involved.

A forum will be held each year, each time with a new set of randomly-selected citizens of the region: 134 in 2002, 196 in 2003, another couple of hundred each year whose horizons are broadened, whose interest in policy issues is piqued and whose knowledge is increased. Each year, every citizen will have an equal chance of being invited to participate. And each year, leaders will be challenged to engage their constituents as citizens capable of helping to shape the policies that affect their future.

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