

## Can the White House Help Catalyze Civic Renewal?

A proposal for a Civic Partnership Council

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*"Where everyman is participator in the government of affairs, not merely at an election one day in the year but everyday, he will let the heart be torn out of his body sooner than his power be wrested from him by a Caesar or a Bonaparte."*

Thomas Jefferson, 1816

*"National Service recognizes a simple but powerful truth—we make progress not by governmental action alone, but we do best when the people and their government work at the grassroots in genuine partnership. The idea of national service permeates many other aspects of the programs I have sought to bring to America.... Unless people know we can work together in our schools and offices, in our factories, unless they believe we can walk the streets safely together, government action alone is doomed to fail."*

William Jefferson Clinton, 1993

### Executive Summary

The proposed Civic Partnership Council is a cross-agency council attached to the Domestic Policy Council, including public representatives, and chaired by the Vice President. Its task is to facilitate and catalyze citizen-government partnerships, civic capacities for public problem solving, common dialogue, and other activities that enhance active and informed citizenship as an essential component of reinventing government. It will build upon the deep American traditions of civic engagement, as well as the more recent legacy of "best cases" in citizen participation throughout government and civic sectors alike, and it will seek to foster a national conversation about the renewed capacities of citizens themselves based upon the practical experiences of engaged public problem solving.

The Civic Partnership Council is proposed as a high visibility, cost effective instrument of the federal government intended to impact positively on the profile and programs of government agencies by strengthening democratic and civic values, principles, and practices. It will help to change the relationship between government and the people whom it serves by enabling government to reengineer itself to be more of a catalyst, facilitator and partner with communities and citizens, and less of a regulator, planner and one-way service provider. The CPC will promote interagency initiatives and local demonstration projects where these are needed to sustain coherent civic empowerment strategies in the distinctive communities and ecosystems that citizens inhabit. It will help overcome the frequently confusing and even contradictory messages that are given to citizens by fragmented bureaucratic program and administration, and hold agencies accountable to a standard of promoting self governance and community responsibility. It will enhance efforts to reinvent government by linking these to the development of social capital and civic networks capable of solving public problems.

### The Problem

Government today faces endemic difficulties in responding effectively to public problems. In part this is due to the fact that we suffer from a quill-pen government in the age of Word Perfect, as Vice President Gore has noted; thus we are now engaged in an ambitious and long overdue attempt to reinvent government. But unless we launch an equally ambitious project to reinvent citizenship, we are unlikely to stem citizen disaffection and lack of trust. We are equally unlikely to realize the full potential to reinvent a government that is "of and by" the people as much as it is "for" the people.

Many Americans see themselves outside of politics and public affairs. Technical and administrative decision making has gradually displaced their own practical civic wisdom. And they have often colluded in a system that treats them as clients seeking benefits rather than as citizens responsible for taking initiative to solve problems with their fellow citizens, including those with whom they might seriously disagree. Bureaucratic procedures and special interest legislative processes have slowly deprived citizens of the practical arts of deliberating and collaborating together.

The public problems we face today, however, are increasingly of the variety that can no longer be solved unless we revive these practical arts. We cannot devise solutions to environmental hazards, for instance, unless citizens themselves take responsibility for recycling materials and properly disposing of household chemicals, unless farmers work with environmentalists on soil erosion, unless community groups collaborate with industry groups to prioritize toxic reduction in ways that do not destroy small businesses and jobs—unless, in short, citizens themselves form partnerships with government and industry in managing local and regional ecosystems. No amount of environmental regulation can replace these arts of collaborative problem solving and honest public deliberation about relative costs and risks. No amount of fines by diligent regulators can be more effective than networks of community, business and environmental groups that have learned how to listen to each other and trust each other over an extended period of working together. No amount of symbolism in a tough new law will reorient our environmental values more than civic, religious and business groups who have learned how to communicate and in the process discover shared stake in their communities, in their children's health, and in the common earth that lies under their homes and factories, fields and playgrounds.

Government can facilitate our doing some of these things, but it can never substitute for them. The problems of community development in the inner city, of school reform, of violence and addiction, and many other problems present similar challenges. They are simply too complex and multifaceted to be solved unless we learn how to mobilize local wisdom, community assets and civic networks. No amount of regulatory and therapeutic solutions that treat people merely as passive victims, needy clients, or righteous claimants will work as policy—or prove viable as politics—in a nation disillusioned with the capacities of government and the techniques of experts.

Nor will adequate solutions be found simply by applying market principles to public problems. Markets can help make many public services more responsive, flexible and cost effective. In some forms they can enhance genuine choice without compromising equity. Yet neither markets nor government alone nor both in combination will prove effective unless they are embedded in vigorous mediating institutions in civil society and imbued with the practical wisdom of a vibrant civic culture capable of nurturing public deliberation and eliciting collaborative action.

### **Rationale for a Civic Partnership Council (CPC)**

The American people have always had a strong tradition of volunteer activity and local problem solving. And even though some of the institutions, civic habits, and public traditions that sustained this in generations past have eroded in recent decades, commitments to voluntary, community, and grassroots involvement have remained energetic, and have even increased.

In addition, organizational countertrends to the steady rise of the bureaucratic and therapeutic state have been substantial, and participatory innovations have continued to be refined through the wisdom of experience. Our community organizing traditions, for instance, are far richer today than ever before. Their networks are more well developed, their nurturance of public leadership skills more careful, their engagement with religious and moral ideals more profound yet ecumenical. They are less strident and self-righteous in their advocacy, and more capable of collaborating in complex and multi-sided partnerships.

Likewise, our community development groups have grown steadily in number, their staffs more technically skilled and politically astute, their support networks more extensive and sophisticated, and their capacities for collaborative action with corporate and financial institutions, religious and government organizations, far more well developed than ever before. Our environmental groups are far more organized at the grassroots local and state levels than ever, more oriented toward practical dispute resolution, more capable of forming collaborative partnerships and learning communities that can respond flexibly to issues of regional ecosystems, comparative risk, and environmental justice. Our grassroots health decisions and bioethics networks have continued to refine techniques for engaging the public in meaningful deliberation about health values, policies, and hard choices, and to build their capacities for partnership with media and provider communities. And our community

computing and civic networking groups are bringing educational and social services onto the information superhighway at an explosive pace, in ways that dramatically lower the costs and enhance the opportunities for collaborative grassroots initiative, innovative program design, and deliberative policy making.

In short, a generation of active civic organizing and participatory practice has matured considerably beyond the righteous advocacy and confrontational styles of earlier decades. Citizen organizations and networks now have considerably enhanced capacities to contribute to genuine public problem solving. Many of our civil servants also welcome attempts to make government more responsive and collaborative, and have a substantial set of best practices upon which to draw. Our legislators need new ways to move beyond the threat of interest group veto and policy stalemate. And our citizens are looking for strategies that engage their practical intelligence and civic commitment, instead of insulting them with the tired rhetoric of left and right, or the false panaceas of more government or more markets.

Yet we will fall short of our potential for civic renewal and public problem solving without a high level institutional space that can allow us to focus on these issues in an integrative and catalytic fashion. This is the space that we see the Civic Partnership Council filling. It is a space where learning communities of civic practitioners in and out of government can convene to share and reflect upon their practical wisdom, their best cases, their common problems. It is the office where strengthening citizenship is the first and foremost task and commands the highest level of sustained government attention. It is the office that catalyzes initiatives and elicits collaborative commitments from public agencies and civic organizations alike.

The Civic Partnership Council is envisioned not as a command center, but as a learning center that can help government at every level learn how to build on the lessons of successful partnerships with communities and citizens in order to change the culture, profile, and practice of citizen-government interaction more generally. Government agencies can no longer afford to see themselves as simply engaged in one-directional service delivery or information transfer. They must instead become facilitators and catalysts for groups of citizens and nongovernmental organizations who share responsibility for the services that our society needs, for the leadership development it must provide, for the public dialogue it ought to conduct—and for the many hard choices it inevitably must make.

The Civic Partnership Council is proposed as a high visibility, cost effective instrument of the federal government intended to impact positively on the profile and programs of government agencies by strengthening democratic and civic values, principles, and practices. It will help to change the relationship between government and the people whom it serves by enabling government to reengineer itself to be more of a catalyst, facilitator and partner with communities and citizens, and less of a regulator, planner and one-way service provider. The CPC will promote interagency initiatives and local demonstration projects where these are needed to sustain coherent civic empowerment strategies in the distinctive communities and ecosystems that citizens inhabit. It will help overcome the frequently confusing and even contradictory messages that are given to citizens by fragmented bureaucratic program and administration, and hold agencies accountable to a standard of promoting self governance and community responsibility. It will enhance efforts to reinvent government by linking these to the development of social capital and civic networks capable of solving public problems.

Building on the lessons of successful partnerships among civic and governmental organizations, the CPC will aim to make government fundamentally citizenship-promoting in the way that it conducts its basic activities and designs its key programs. And it will aim to provide incentives for citizens and civic organizations to mobilize the assets of their own communities, including their human and relational assets, to solve problems. In an era of limited resources, we must encourage renewed civic creativity if we are to do more with less—and, indeed, if we simply are to get it right in whatever we choose as a nation to do. Active, participatory, and empowered citizens are the route to such creativity. We need to think at every step of the way about how to use the instruments at hand to catalyze a range of positive problem-solving activities that is ten, or a hundred, even a thousand times greater than the initial impulse or the ultimate capacity of the government itself.

In seeking to encourage citizen participation in new partnerships for public problem solving, the CPC will challenge the civil service to rediscover and reinvent its own "civic" mission, and to reorient its style of behavior towards those it serves. It will encourage an ethos of empowering and collaborating with a diverse, inclusive constellation of community groups, volunteers, nonprofits, educational institutions, media, and private sector organizations. And it will promote training initiatives that reinforce this ethos and provide the specific skills needed, so that expert and professional cultures of civil servants are not autonomous and intimidating, but embedded in a vibrant civic culture that they share in common with citizens generally.

The CPC will also aim to ensure that new information and communications technologies are designed and introduced in government agencies in ways that serve the goals of civic capacity building and collaborative partnership. Such technologies represent important laboratories of democracy in the information age. They can be designed to be citizen-friendly rather than cumbersome, confusing, and inaccessible. They can facilitate policy dialogues among stakeholders seeking consensus, and thus produce more refined and broadly legitimate policy making than mere interest group lobbying. They can enable civic groups to share resources and best practices horizontally, and to hold agencies—and each other—accountable for their actions. They can reduce the costs of citizens working together to get things done, and thus make them less dependent on layers of bureaucratic intermediaries.

In the age of the smart machine, the computer should not only serve as the meeting place for problem solving across professional and organizational boundaries in our most advanced postindustrial workplaces. It should also be able to serve as the meeting place for public problem solving by any group of individual citizens and civic organizations willing to collaborate in good faith in a genuine search. Citizens should never think that the first step to solving a public problem is to go to a bureaucrat, lawyer, politician or judge. The first step, rather, should be to turn to their own civic and community networks to discover the civic wisdom and resources available, and to learn how to mobilize these effectively and collaboratively. This is the ethos of citizen empowerment. And in the information age we should be designing computer and telecommunications systems to make this first step second nature.

In short, we propose the creation of a Civic Partnership Council that can become a place where the very best practices and ideas for reinventing citizenship can be shared, refined, and disseminated, where they can serve to educate lawmakers and agencies alike about how to design programs that empower citizens to solve problems collaboratively, where they can catalyze innovative initiatives at all levels of government, and where they can nurture a renewed national conversation about our legacy and future as active and empowered citizens.

### **Structure and Membership of the CPC**

The Civic Partnership Council is designed as a cross-agency council that includes representatives of the public, is chaired by the Vice President, and is attached to the Domestic Policy Council. It will have 15-20 members, including senior government officials from different agencies. Public representatives will include at least six civic leaders drawn from NGOs and the voluntary sector, academia, private industry, the media, and foundations. Nominations will be selected by a standing and independent panel of eminent civic leaders chosen by a consortium of civic organizations and citizenship programs. Nominations will be presented to and reviewed by the White House. Membership is staggered, with no member serving more than four years. The CPC will meet twice each year.

The CPC will have five senior staff, including a Director, made up of appropriately experienced public servants assigned from other agencies, serving on a rotating basis for two-year terms. Staff working on special projects can also be suggested by civic organizations and foundations that are willing to provide the resources (funding, staff on loan, other organizational supports) to ensure diverse and effective collaborative partnerships. Basic operating expenses will be shared by civic organizations and foundations. The Director will report to the President or Vice President through the Domestic Policy Council.

### **Functions**

The CPC will concern itself with improving government programs, policy-making processes, and civil service performance to promote the values of active citizenship and the capacities of civic organizations themselves for public problem solving, collaborative partnership, deliberative dialogue, and agenda setting. It will have eight designated functions:

1. To prepare an initial assessment, due at the end of the first year, of ways that government has successfully encouraged citizen participation and has helped to sustain a strong civic culture, as well as the major obstacles in program design to these. This should include
  - a. Assessment of best case examples from agencies and various sectors of government and civil society that can serve as benchmarks to catalyze broader initiatives and to educate citizens about participatory and collaborative ways of reinventing government and setting public agendas

- updating the compendium of federal citizen participation programs prepared by the Interagency Council for Citizen Participation in the late 1970s;
- b. Assessment of agency regulations, requirements, and behavior toward citizen participation; examining how well agencies work with the public, and what obstacles tend to impede this;
  - c. Assessment of how relationships between legislative and executive branches, among agencies, and among different levels of government affect civic culture and organizational capacity, including analysis of freedom of information policy, sunset and sunshine laws regarding citizen advisory groups, and other relevant practices and policies;
  - d. Preparation of a report with recommendations for the Vice President.
2. To prepare an executive order on the enhancement of citizen participation and other appropriate legislation, including such examples as
    - a. Guidelines for accessible, easy-to-understand information delivery to and from the public;
    - b. Guidelines for best practices in public hearings, deliberative democratic designs, and alternative approaches for citizen dialogue and dispute resolution;
    - c. Criteria for legislation, grant and program implementation approaches that are attentive to and supportive of community and civic problem solving, with special consideration for stressed communities;
    - d. Guidelines on best-case strategies for technical professionals' interaction with citizens;
    - e. Selected citizen problem-solving initiatives through appropriate federal delivery systems (e.g. USDA/Extension Services).
  3. To develop, in association with an interagency task force, a comprehensive strategy to redefine and reinvigorate the civil service. Emphasis should be placed on its "civil," civic responsibilities. Such a strategy should go beyond traditional notions of civil servant as narrow expert and one-way service deliverer or administrator, and should build on concepts and practices of civil service as catalyst, partner and facilitator for citizen and community problem solving. This should include a strategy for comprehensive civic and participatory training across all agencies as an integral part of the training that civil servants now receive.
  4. To develop a biannual report on the civic health of the nation and the civic performance of government. [1]  
CPC staff will
    - a. Assist agencies, possibly through the mechanism of Offices, to develop assessment procedures for the civic impact of their major program initiatives;
    - b. Explore innovative formats for providing "civic accounts" of agency programs that can engage broad public attention, as well as critical and collaborative input from civic organizations themselves. Such formats could include video ones that present best cases and civic stories in an engaging way, that invite the viewing public to learn the arts of collaborative problem solving and public dialogue, and that welcome civic partners themselves to collaborate in production to ensure that the text of the civic account is open, balanced, nonpropagandistic, and a source of constructive criticism, civic education, and ongoing citizen involvement in agency programs. Towards the latter goal, civic accounts should point citizens towards the further information and contacts needed to sustain active involvement and creative collaboration. Civic accounts and impact assessments, in short, should not simply be technical and legal documents, but practical and educative ones in the most democratically accessible formats available, among which video is foremost.
  5. To develop an integrative strategy that can make civic education an important component of how all of our institutions do their work, be they educational, professional, service, legal, media, health, or commercial.  
CPC staff will
    - a. Work with civic partners to facilitate the development of practical, case-based and active- learning materials that are suitable to a great range of institutional settings and are available in video- and computer-based formats.
    - b. Collaborate with the Department of Education, state education departments, associations of universities and professional training schools to devise strategies and incentives for incorporating

such practical civic curricula into educational institutions and professional training programs of all sorts (health, media, social service, legal, business, computer).

6. To assist in the development of civic networking and community-wide education and information services as an essential part of the National Information Infrastructure by
  - a. Working with agencies, media, civic organizations, and civic and community electronic networking groups to ensure easy and wide access, user-friendly and scalable systems, and many-to-many communication, with a particular emphasis on ensuring that federal information systems promote free or low-cost access, and promote designs that facilitate civic initiative, collaborative partnership, and public accountability;
  - b. Working with the NII Task Force to ensure that among its Vision and Goals projects the commitment to active citizenship and civic capacity is a central and integrating theme;
  - c. Working with civic organizations and networks that seek to develop independent networking capacities whose central focus is civic education, public leadership development, collaborative problem solving skills, and deliberative democratic designs.
7. To develop a menu of top priorities for government action and research in the area of civic renewal and citizen-government partnership, and to direct these to appropriate agencies and funding institutions. CPC staff will assist in
  - a. Convening a network of academic and research groups and centers to enlist them in working on specific and collaborative projects. Such centers would include those with a focus on civic education and civic capacity development, citizenship and democracy, alternative dispute resolution, civic and community computer networking, community capacity-focused development, community-based social services, community quality coalitions, and the like.
  - b. Facilitating the development and diffusion of innovative models for ongoing university collaboration in community problem solving.
8. To assist citizens and leaders in their efforts to elaborate a shared vision of common citizenship and active democracy, as well as of an effective civil service capable of sustaining these in the twenty-first century. CPC staff will analyze and diffuse best cases in a way that contributes to broad civic education and to ongoing national conversation about how to renew the responsibilities of citizens themselves to set public agendas and to solve public problems.

### **Relations with Other Government Agencies and Authorities**

The Civic Partnership Council will collaborate with other agencies and local authorities in finding ways to identify, facilitate, and catalyze programs that are citizenship enhancing. It will coordinate its initiatives as much as possible with the Reinvention Teams, Reinvention Labs, and Public Participation programs that already exist. It will not dictate, but establish a mutual learning framework that can sustain the inevitably long and difficult process of transforming regulatory, service, and policy-making cultures.

It will seek to develop incentives for agencies and local governments to identify and build upon their own best practices, and to reduce the costs and barriers of learning the best practices of others. It will make special efforts to identify the sources of friction between local citizen involvement programs and elected local officials, and to share practices broadly that have led to positive-sum complementarities at the local level rather than divisive conflict or stalemate.

To the extent that the CPC will help prepare executive orders and draft legislation on citizen participation, it will do so on the basis of a careful review of practical experiences, the specificity of regulatory and service issues in different agencies, and the necessity of flexible and collaborative models of participation, rather than ones with rigid standards or representative claims that are divorced from practical problem solving and mutual public dialogue. Likewise, it will help develop the tools and data for effective Congressional oversight, so that Congress can evaluate citizen participation on more than vague symbols, abstract rights, or procedural formalities.

The CPC will draw upon the fund of experience and practical insight of past and existing government initiatives that seek to engage citizens actively in a process of "civic discovery," as Labor Secretary Robert Reich refers to it. These initiatives are

many and varied, and worthy of the kind of sustained attention and support that can spur a more general civic renewal. They range from HUD's empowerment zones and tenant management programs to community service and Americorps, from EPA's community relations and environmental justice programs to the civic environmentalism of regional ecosystem management, from the community partnerships of HHS' substance abuse prevention programs to community dispute resolution techniques of the Corps of Engineers and the Forest Service, from the official neighborhood associational structures of dynamic city governments to teacher and parent empowerment teams in innovative school systems.

### Relations To Other Civic Initiatives

The Civic Partnership Council will also seek to collaborate with and learn from a variety of independent civic initiatives on a nonpartisan basis. It will recognize and respect the diversity of such initiatives, even as it seeks to create conditions and incentives for collaboration and complementarity among them wherever this might be appropriate.

Nongovernmental public representatives on the CPC should be chosen on a nonpartisan basis, and an important criterion of selection should be their proven capacity to work with a variety of different groups and across the boundaries of civic sector and partisan divide. For special projects, the CPC should welcome resources and staff on loan from civic organizations and foundations, to the extent consistent with reasonable bounds of manageability. On issues where the citizenry is particularly divided, the CPC should make special efforts to enlist civic organizations from a variety of perspectives to collaborate in projects that promote respectful dialogue, and that seek to determine some grounds for increased trust and tolerance, as well as areas of possible consensus.

As in the government sector, there are many initiatives in the civic sector that are worthy of further attention, and that can complement and enhance the former. These include grassroots health decisions networks in states like Georgia and California that have refined value-based deliberative models and also media partnerships for civic journalism in ways that make public outreach in health reform educative, empowering, and inclusive. They include models of public leadership development and faith-based organizing of IAF groups like Texas Interfaith and Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development, and secular civic leadership education such as that undertaken by Minnesota Extension Services across the state. They include the many techniques of citizen juries, deliberative polls, policy dialogues, study circles, and community dispute resolution. They include all kinds of community-based services in the nonprofit sector and community asset-based development, as well as the exponential burgeoning of civic and community networking spurred by the Free-Nets, community computing centers, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's grants for community-wide education and information services designed by grassroots partnerships themselves.

There are no lack of civic initiatives and innovative models upon which we might fashion more coherent policies for renewing active citizenship. And there are substantial resources waiting to be tapped among civic foundations and private corporations, some of whom have recently focused new energy on community-based and citizenship-enhancing approaches to solving public problems. What is needed is a clear and resounding signal of support from the White House, and the institutional framework for civic partnership that is capable of catalyzing and sustaining support for such initiatives.

The Civic Partnership Council should never promote partisan advantage, nor should it simply seek to focus on the capacities and responsiveness of government alone. Its purpose is to foster independent and active citizenship and the development of the social capital needed to sustain this. It should aim to promote policies that enhance the capacities of civic networks themselves for collaborative problem solving and public deliberation.

<sup>1</sup> Paul Light developed the concept of Citizen Liaison Office for the The Reinventing Citizenship Project in his working paper, "Organizing Government for Citizen Engagement"; Light, Amitai Etzioni, and Michael Lipsky proposed variations on the concept of civic impact analysis of government programming.