

OUR COMMON PURPOSE



REINVENTING AMERICAN DEMOCRACY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Imagining a Trust for Civic Infrastructure

Investing in the local people, places, and programs that strengthen American communities and build common purpose.

The United States is at an inflection point as we near the 250th anniversary of the American experiment. We must forge a renewed sense of common purpose to meet the challenges of the 21st century and beyond. Given how polarized we have become, and how out of touch many of us are from those whose life experiences and beliefs are different from our own, how can we recommit ourselves to our country, our democracy, and one another?

The local communities where individuals are most likely to share experiences and feel empowered to make positive change are often overlooked in national conversations about the crisis of American democracy. Our communities—rural, suburban, and urban—play a critical role in shaping Americans’ trust in government, institutions, and one another. By tapping into the creativity, compassion, and entrepreneurial spirit alive in the places where we live, we can begin to realize a 21st century democracy. To restore our civic health, we urgently need significant, sustained investment in **civic infrastructure: the local places, programs, and people that encourage all residents to interact, find common ground, and solve problems together.**

Robust civic infrastructure strengthens habits of association and empowers people as vital participants in community life. Communities that prioritize civic health and provide accessible, adaptive civic spaces that welcome all residents are more resilient, equitable, and inclusive. They provide residents with opportunities to live and work alongside one another and productively negotiate disagreements. Active and engaged communities are the building blocks of a flourishing democratic society.

Since the monumental yet unevenly distributed investments of the New Deal era, the United States has chronically underfunded the backbone of our democracy. While the National Endowment for Democracy supports what President Reagan called “the infrastructure of democracy” abroad in a 1983 speech, no such support exists to sustain democracy at home. We must prioritize and fund the infrastructure that provides opportunities for all Americans to participate fully in civic life and enjoy the rights and responsibilities of our constitutional democracy. The time has come for a Trust for Civic Infrastructure.

Vibrant civic life in every community is necessary for American democracy to flourish

Local communities are already building civic infrastructure.

- A young civic leader in the Lexington, Kentucky launched CivicLex, a digital platform to give his community the information they need to participate in civic life and engage with local government.



Rockefeller Brothers Fund

Philanthropy for an Interdependent World

- In Akron, Ohio, civic entrepreneurs, local government, philanthropists, and community groups worked across silos and sectors to turn an old canal towpath into a bike trail and public park that connects economically and racially segregated neighborhoods and connects residents to welcoming public spaces and one another.
- The pastor of a church in Spokane, Washington opened the doors for extended hours to create the Gathering Place, an accessible public meeting space so all residents regardless of religious beliefs could have a place to assemble and organize.

Each of these ongoing efforts leverages community leadership and assets to meet locally defined priorities. Without sustained commitments of time, money, and talent, they would not be possible. They represent the seeds of civic and democratic renewal that, with sufficient resources, coordination, and attention, can flourish and spread by connecting currently disparate civic initiatives, leaders, and groups together into a larger national effort to strengthen American democracy from the ground up.

In its final report, *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' cross-partisan, interdisciplinary Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship called for the creation of a **Trust for Civic Infrastructure**. The recommendation is rooted in the challenges and hopes that Commission members heard in conversation with Americans from across the country. The Commission held over 50 listening sessions in communities across the country, speaking to a broad cross-section of Americans about their hopes for local civic renewal as well as their fears for our democracy.

In our era of profound polarization, Americans are hungry for opportunities to build common purpose. Civic infrastructure provides the opportunity.

As one Lowell, Massachusetts resident put it, *“We don’t have enough spaces, enough civic spaces where people actually do learn how to be civic...There’s very few places where everyone in the community is entitled to go and be working together.”*¹

A Trust for Civic Infrastructure will facilitate the substantial long-term investment necessary to create and sustain civic spaces and the people and programs that animate them. Our vision is healthy democratic culture in every community.

The Trust will serve as connective tissue for local, regional, state, and national groups and organizations invested in strengthening American democracy from the ground up through civic investment. To build vital, equitable, responsive civic cultures at the local level, the Trust will collaborate with community partners, including civil society organizations, community foundations, religious organizations, libraries, parks, and recreation centers, local government agencies, local media, grassroots community groups, and local businesses. In communities that lack a robust and sustained civic support network, the Trust will help to identify, support, and connect grassroots groups and early-stage civic entrepreneurs with financial and social capital. It will facilitate cutting edge research and learning to make the case for civic infrastructure. At the national level, the Trust will knit together resources and knowledge from the private,

¹ The Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship. [Our Common Purpose: Reinventing Democracy for the 21st Century](#). 2020.

philanthropic, not-for-profit, and public sectors and use them to amplify and connect with work happening at local level.

A Trust for Civic Infrastructure Overview

Civic infrastructure is the foundation of American democracy. Our country is only as strong as our habits of association, our willingness to discover common ground, and our relationships across difference to solve shared problems.

Civic Infrastructure		
People	Places	Programs
Local Roots	Shared	Solve local problems
Leadership Development	Equitable	Improve local news and information
Skill building	Inclusive	Create shared experiences
Bridgebuilding	Accessible	Expand civic participation
Network Development	Safe	Connect communities with local government
	Physical & Digital	

Mission: *To invest in the local people, places, and programs that strengthen American democracy and build common purpose.*

Guiding Principles for Desired Outcomes

Foster civic health: The Trust will invest in the local spaces, programs, and people that allow all residents to develop the habits and skills to be active participants in civic life and solve problems together.

Center local community: The Trust will invest and act in ways that align with the specific assets, priorities, resources, and needs identified by the community itself. To do this, the Trust will work with trusted local partners to identify and support initiatives that were designed or co-created by community members through participatory processes.

Facilitate research and shared learning: The Trust will study and collect best practices from the field and facilitate ongoing learning, knowledge sharing, and community-based leadership development.

Combat inequities and advance justice and inclusion: The Trust will also support initiatives that make communities more welcoming, safe, inclusive, and accessible for all residents.

Support civic innovation: The Trust will support new approaches to spark civic investment and renewal.

Transcend partisanship: The Trust will support initiatives that recognize that the health of our democratic republic transcends political parties.

Activities

Grantmaking: Invest in local priorities.

There are three core areas of grantmaking. The goal across each area is to support traditionally under-resourced organizations; reduce barriers to entry for applicants; and offer the types of funding that organizations and people need the most (e.g., unrestricted dollars when applicable).

- **Sustain.** Support the operations and capacity building of local organizations that are creating and stewarding civic infrastructure in their communities. Organizations led by and serving members of historically marginalized communities that have not yet received sustaining levels of philanthropic support will be priorities.
- **Scale.** Support the adaptation of an existing civic initiative that has been successful in one locality into new sites in a different part of the state or country. Funding would support the originators as well as the adapters of the civic initiative.
- **Spark.** Nominate and support organizations and individuals with unrestricted grants of \$2000 to \$10,000 to implement innovative ideas for improving the civic health of their communities. In addition to receiving funds, grantees would be provided with ongoing support and technical assistance to bring their proposed projects to fruition and network with others in their community and field.

Knowledge sharing: Support innovation and facilitate training and learning across communities.

Local civic leaders and organizations often face similar problems in isolation from one another – they are both inventing promising, replicable solutions and making avoidable errors. The Trust will support and invest in knowledge sharing, skills development, collaboration, and relationship building opportunities to connect and cultivate local leaders and organizations who sustain civic infrastructure. It will create an evidence base of learnings on civic infrastructure. The forum and form of this knowledge sharing may include virtual or in-person local or regional conferences, trainings, networking events, retreats, a clearinghouse of civic learning and innovation, etc.

Field Building: Create national connections between local efforts and support impactful networks.

The Trust will partner with existing local and national organizations that share its commitment to investment in civic infrastructure, becoming a central hub for the field. In recognition of the scope of the challenges that communities face and the number of communities in need of support, the Trust will work to situate itself as a central repository for the field to ensure synergies, amplification, and vital connections.

Case making: Create public awareness towards investment at scale.

The Trust will build the case for why civic infrastructure should be a major funding priority for national and place-based private, corporate, and community foundations; individual donors; and local, state, and federal public investment. The Trust will seek to optimize national private and public funding to augment and support local resources, with its own grantmaking, knowledge sharing, and field building activities, and will draw on what it learns from these activities to make the case for sustained investment in the civic infrastructure of all communities.

Eligibility for Trust Support

1. Proposed project goals must align with Trust principles and demonstrate how it could measurably achieve Trust outcomes.
2. Proposed project must be rooted in a specific neighborhood, municipality, region, or state.

3. Proposed project must clearly demonstrate how it addresses deficits or gaps in current civic infrastructure.
4. Proposed project should have the potential for replication and provide opportunities for learning within and across communities.
5. Project applicants must be willing to participate in a collaborative research, evaluation, and knowledge sharing.

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS & SCIENCES

In June 2020, the American Academy of Arts & Sciences' Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship released *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*. Recommendation 4.1 of *Our Common Purpose* calls for the establishment of a Trust for Civic Infrastructure. Over the course of the year 2021, the AAA&S convened a working group of thought leaders, practitioners, and other experts in the field to advance this recommendation.

Chairs, Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship

Danielle Allen, *Harvard University*
Stephen Heintz, *Rockefeller Brothers Fund*
Eric Liu, *Citizen University*

Commission Members

Sayu Bhojwani, *Women's Democracy Lab*
danah boyd, *Data & Society*
Caroline Brettell, *Southern Methodist University*
David Brooks, *The New York Times*
David Campbell, *University of Notre Dame*
Alan Dachs, *Fremont Group*
Dee Davis, *Center for Rural Strategies*
Jonathan F. Fanton, *President Emeritus, American Academy of Arts & Sciences*
Lisa García Bedolla, *University of California, Berkeley*
Sam Gill, *John S. and James L. Knight Foundation*
Marie Griffith, *Washington University in Saint Louis*
Hahrie Han, *Johns Hopkins University*
Antonia Hernández, *California Community Foundation*
Wallace Jefferson, *Alexander Dubose & Jefferson, LLP*
Joseph Kahne, *University of California, Riverside*
Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, *Tufts University*
Yuval Levin, *National Affairs*
Carolyn Lukensmeyer, *National Institute for Civil Discourse*
Martha McCoy, *Everyday Democracy*
Lynn Nottage, *Playwright*
Steven Olikara, *Millennial Action Project*
Norman Ornstein, *American Enterprise Institute*
Bob Peck, *FPR Partners*
Pete Peterson, *Pepperdine University*
Miles Rapoport, *Harvard University*
Michael Schudson, *Columbia University*
Sterling Speirn, *National Conference on Citizenship*
Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, *University of Massachusetts, Boston*

Ben Vinson, *Case Western Reserve University*
Diane Wood, *U.S. Court of Appeals, Seventh Circuit*
Judy Woodruff, *PBS*
Ethan Zuckerman, *University of Massachusetts, Amherst*

Commission Staff

Paul J. Erickson (former Program Director), *American Academy of Arts & Sciences*
Darshan Goux (Program Director), *American Academy of Arts & Sciences*
Katherine Gagen (former Program Associate), *American Academy of Arts & Sciences*
Gabiella Hearst (former Program Associate), *American Academy of Arts & Sciences*

Trust for Civic Infrastructure Working Group Members

Hollie Russon Gilman (Chair), *New America and Columbia University*
Elizabeth Youngling (Staff Lead), *American Academy of Arts & Sciences*

Lisa Adkins, *Blue Grass Community Foundation*
Whitney Kimball Coe, *Center for Rural Strategies*
Susan Eaton, *Sillerman Center for the Advancement of Philanthropy, Brandeis University*
Hélène Biandudi Hofer, formerly *Solutions Journalism Network*
Rev. Dr. F. Willis Johnson, Jr., *Bridge Alliance*
Ashley Trim Labosier, *Consortium of University Public Service Organizations*
Jennifer Lawson, *Points of Light Foundation*
Myung Lee, *Volunteers of America-Greater New York*
David Martinez III, *Vitalyst Health Foundation*
Jeremy McKey, *Rockefeller Brothers Fund*
Tiago Peixoto, *The World Bank Group*
Sanjiv Rao, formerly *The Ford Foundation*
Lynn Ross, *Spirit for Change Consulting, LLC*
Sarah Ruger, *The Stand Together Foundation*
Lilly Weinberg, *The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation*