Local Issues Forum Guidebook

Prepared by E-Democracy.Org for
the UK Pilot Issues Forums

Final UK Version 5.0
15 March 2005

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What is an Issues Forum?

You might be asking yourself, "What is a local Issues Forum?"

Simply put, a local Issues Forum is an online forum like a town hall meeting or public commons where any citizen, journalist, or elected official can:

- Post an idea,
- Ask a question,
- Make a public announcement,
- Connect with one another,
- Monitor public opinion,
- Ask for public input, and
- A place where journalists can look for story ideas or identify sources for articles.

The goals of a local Issues Forum are to give everyone a greater voice in local decisions and encourage more citizen participation in local public policy making. It provides a forum for decision-makers to receive immediate feedback from the community on issues that must be decided or voted on in council.

One of the most important features of a local Issues Forum is that it is citizen-driven. Anyone can introduce a topic, concern, or idea for discussion as long as it relates to an issue that impacts the quality of life in the local community. A local Issues Forum empowers individual citizens to bring their ideas, suggestions, and concerns to the forefront of public attention.

Preface

This guidebook is designed for those interested in establishing Local Issues Forums. It is focused on the United Kingdom but evolved directly from the experience of E-Democracy.Org. E-Democracy.Org is based in Minnesota, United States. Care has been taken to present this guidebook for a UK audience, but we hope it is general enough for a worldwide "local" audience.

The main audiences for this guide are new local E-Democracy.Org Issues Forum steering committee members, individuals who work with local authorities, and citizens exploring the Issues Forums idea in detail. Left in one piece, this guidebook is not designed for individual participants nor is it meant to provide a basic introduction to Issues Forums. That is the role of our website and the multimedia E-Democracy Experience.

Special thanks goes to the UK Local E-democracy National Project and Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for supporting the development of this guidebook, the open source release of improved GroupServer technology, and for their support of the initial Issues Forums in Brighton & Hove, Newham, and Melksham.

Special message to UK Local Authorities

As part of E-Democracy.Org's arrangement with UK Local E-Democracy National Project, any UK local authority or community group may create an Issues Forum through at least December 2005 on our existing server. Furthermore, after a decade of non-profit growth, we have no plans to stop service to any existing forum. Our goal is to launch and support many more Issues Forums in local communities across the UK and around the world.

Community or voluntary sector-based organisations may also use locally raised government funding or simply their own volunteer capacity to establish "Issues Forums" with E-Democracy.Org. These forums are considered part of E-Democracy.Org, which also assumes the limited liabilities that come from such legal ownership.

However, Issues Forums established by a local authority are legally owned by that local authority, unless a different relationship is agreed with E-Democracy.Org. Such government-owned forums require a citizen advisory committee and clearly defined oversight policies to run on the E-Democracy.Org server. The "Cost/Benefit" appendix continues an exploration of our opportunity and policy implications.

Any entity is free to adapt the Issues Forum concept (using a different name) for its purposes. Entities are encouraged to use the parts of this guide that are helpful and discard concepts that they feel are not appropriate for their situation. Furthermore, anyone may download and host the expert-level open source GroupServer software or use other interactive technologies. Please see *Appendix H* (page 52) on alternative Issues Forum technology implementations for more information.

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Introduction

This year, E-Democracy.Org is celebrating its 10th anniversary.

For more than a decade, we have explored the frontiers of online citizen participation. We have found the power of the Internet to inform and engage citizens to be exciting to some and quite challenging to others. Despite these conflicting viewpoints, most observers agree that the era of online citizen engagement remains in its infancy and its potential has yet to be achieved. In this new environment, we are explorers and innovators charting a new course. We are laying a foundation and creating approaches and tools that can transform the role of citizens in a democratic society.

Over these years of experimentation and innovation, E-Democracy.Org volunteers have accumulated a great deal of knowledge and skill in the formation and management of online civic forums. Until recently, this knowledge existed only in the heads of our volunteers. Our partnership with the *U.K. Local E-democracy National Project* makes it possible for us to assemble and present our practices in this comprehensive guide.

The E-Democracy.Org model is one we share openly. Since the beginning, we've told everyone we've met about our democratic work and how we do it. Our goal is to encourage and empower citizens and communities around the world to use the Internet as a tool to strengthen local democracies. By setting up Local Issues Forums, we all can share ideas, information, and opinions with other citizens, public leaders, and the media.

This manual is set up in three distinct sections, each focusing on a different audience – they may be printed and used independently or together:

Section 1: Setting Up A Local Issues Forum – This section is intended for everyone on the steering committee of your Local Issues Forum. It includes step-by-step instructions for laying the groundwork and launching a successful local Issues Forum. It also includes ideas for what to do next and how to expand the work of your local Issues Forum in your community and how to eventually become a local chapter of E-Democracy.Org.

Section 2: A Citizens' Guide to Participating in an Issues Forum – This section provides citizens with information about how to effectively participate in a Local Issues Forum. Participants who know how to use the forum efficiently from the start are much more likely to stick around and become effective e-citizens.

Section 3: The Forum Managers' Guide – This section is for the person or people who take on the role of managing your Local Issues Forum on a day-to-day basis. The role of Forum Manager is critical to the success of your forum. This section provides practical tips and advice about how to successfully manage a local Issues Forum.

Please take the information in this manual and mix it with your own common sense and experiences to create opportunities for online citizen engagement. There is no one right way to approach e-democracy. If you build information age democracy on your own or within the growing network of E-Democracy.Org projects, we wish you the best and look forward to including the knowledge and experience you develop in future editions of this manual.

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Section 1:
Setting Up a Local Issues Forum

Internet technology holds the promise of making citizen participation easier and more flexible than ever before. When combined with tried and tested facilitation techniques and grassroots organizing skills, e-democracy has the potential to engage a larger and more diverse assembly of citizens in the making and implementation of public policy, than ever before. One means of accomplishing these goals, is the Local Issues Forum.

However, there is much more to building and managing a Local Issues Forum than the "build it and they will come" mentality that has led to so many online failures. We can best summarize the lessons that we have learned about building an online Local Issues Forum in the following 10 statements:

- Pick Your Democracy
- Recruit Steering Committee and Forum Manager
- Create Mission, Establish Rules, and Set Goals
- Select Technology
- Recruit, Recruit, Recruit
- Involve the Community
- Launch Publicity – Get The Word Out!
- Facilitate and Manage
- Be Patient and Persevere
- Celebrate

1. Pick Your Democracy

Select the geographic area or area that makes the most sense for you to work with. Depending upon where you live, you might want to organise on a community, city, borough, county, township, parish, neighbourhood, or regional level. Democratic participation is usually based upon some kind of geographic district.

In the United States, it is often said that "all politics are local". Keeping an E-Democracy.Org forum local is the best way to hold participants and elected officials accountable for what takes place in the forum. In addition, citizens are more likely to feel comfortable engaging on issues that are "close to home" and when they feel as if their participation can actually have an impact. Local officials are most likely to participate, because they are the closest to their constituents and understand the need to keep in touch with public opinion.

Consider starting with an area that includes a population larger than 25,000, yet less than 1 million. This will provide the critical mass of participants necessary to sustain the forum, yet will help avoid the risk that participants will feel completely disconnected from each other.

Neighbourhoods are also a natural starting point, but we recommend starting city-wide first and then encouraging others to establish neighbourhood e-mail lists or online forums as the city-wide forum matures. In very large cities, of 1 million or more, we would encourage you to consider a strategy of picking one district or section of the city to start with.

2. Steering Committee and Forum Manager

Organise a small service "club" (a local E-Democracy.Org steering committee) to serve as the nonpartisan, nonprofit, trusted, neutral host for your Local Issues Forum. As a host organisation, you must be neutral on all issues for a true online public commons to develop.

Your steering committee will be responsible for writing your charter, selecting a forum manager, and overseeing the ongoing development of your forum. Try to include representatives from a variety of community organisations, including government, on your steering committee. The purpose of having a "citizen-based" steering committee is to provide legitimacy, build trust in the forum management, and serve as an effective buffer between the interests of any one partner. In short, *no one individual, organisation or government agency should be in a position to censor, limit the discussion, or close the forum based on its narrow political interests.*

3. Create Mission, Establish Rules, and Set Goals

You won't be able to judge your success, if you don't identify your mission and goals up front. Don't set your short-term expectations too high. Here are a couple of identifiable short-term goals (first 2-3 months) that will help keep you on track.

- *You have an active forum.* The mere fact that participants are still taking the time to post messages indicates a level of success that should not be underestimated.

- *Participants are sharing information*. One key indicator of success is that participants are taking the time to move beyond simple opinions and complaints toward sharing information and asking questions. This is what makes an E-Democracy.Org forum different from much of what already exists.

- *Local government officials are aware of your existence*. It's important to make elected officials and staff aware of the forum early on. Don't necessarily expect them to post messages or get involved too quickly – the mere fact that they have taken notice of what you are doing is a huge step in the right direction.

- *You are gaining new members*. Even if it's only one or two a week, the fact that the word is beginning to spread and that people are taking the time to join/subscribe means that you are beginning to have an impact.

Don't be deceived by the apparent simplicity of these goals – building a successful Local Issues Forum can be a long-term project. Take pride in the progress that you are making and celebrate minor achievements.

Draft a short charter for your Local Issues Forum. This is essential. Your one or two paragraph description of the forum will set the tone for more civil discussions online. See *Appendix B* (Page 31) for a sample charter from the Minneapolis and Brighton & Hove Forums.

If your Issues Forum is started as part of E-Democracy.Org, you may simply adapt our charter template to your community by building upon our well-crafted and effective rules (see *Appendix F* – Page 42). Be sure your steering committee has a thorough discussion of the mission and rules and takes into consideration the specifics of your community. In our 2002 participant survey, only 3 percent of participants felt the rules were negative and 88 percent felt they were positive. Only 9 percent felt they had no effect.

If you are working outside the official E-Democracy framework, carefully draft rules that reflect the goals and ambitions of your forum. It is much easier to start with good rules than to add them later.

We have found great success with three basic rules:

- No one may post more than twice a day.
- All posts must be signed with the participant's full real name and city or neighbourhood.
- No personal attacks - stick to issues.

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An official local E-Democracy forum charter may highlight and expand upon the rules framework. A charter may not run counter to the rules or remove a right granted to participants. For example, to build trust, accountability, and relevancy, we've established a right of participants to know the real names of those with whom they are participating. Universal rights cannot be removed by provisions in a local charter.

See *Explanation of Key Rules* (page 21) for more background and explanation of these rules and others.

4. Technology

While a Local Issues Forum can be set up using any of the readily available platforms or tools, as part of E-Democracy.Org, your community will have access to our installation of the GroupServer technology. GroupServer combines the best aspects of e-mail lists and web forums and is continually being updated to address the specific needs of E-Democracy.Org Local Issues Forums.

A Local Issues Forum can also be set up using YahooGroups or any of the other free online community services. The downside to many of these services is that you will have no control over the advertisements placed in your forum, which some participants might find objectionable or offensive. Some E-Democracy.Org Local Issues Forums are currently using Mailman, another open source e-mail list software package.

We discourage the use of tools that can only be accessed via web browsers. Such tools demand broadband access for efficient use, which is an unnecessary barrier to participation for many people. E-Democracy.Org has found that because email "comes to you" and doesn't require a participant to log onto a website, participation is generally better than in similar web-based forums. In addition, the structure of an email forum tends to increase the likelihood that participants will be exposed to a variety of issues and not just those that are aligned with their current viewpoints – making for a much more diverse and meaningful discussion.

With any of these services, it only takes a few minutes to technically set up a forum. Don't let this fool you. Most of the work is yet to come.

See *Appendix H* (page 52) for a more complete list of available technology solutions.

5. Recruit

Don't rely on the "build it and they will come" mindset that has led to so many failed online communities. You must first tell them that it exists and how to access it. Experience has shown that discussion participants must be recruited one at a time. Before recruiting, decide on the minimum number of subscribers necessary to sustain your forum. E-Democracy.Org recommends a minimum of 100 participants before opening the discussion for participation. This is important because launching your forum before you have sufficient participation to sustain the discussion may damage your credibility with participants and partners.

You only have one chance to make a first impression, so make sure you have enough participants registered before launch. The more people you have signed up when you open the forum for participation, the broader and deeper the sense of community ownership will be. Don't stop recruiting after you've launched; you'll need a flow of new recruits to replace those initial participants who decide not to continue.

Next, develop a targeted list of individuals to recruit, considering advice from those well-connected in the community. Then e-mail, call, and perhaps physically visit community leaders, elected officials, and local journalists to sign them up for the forum before it opens. Get their email addresses and obtain their permission to subscribe them yourself rather than waiting for them to do it on their own. After they are signed up, forward them an announcement/invitation and ask them to help spread the word by forwarding it to others they think might be interested in participating. Consider other in-person recruiting events in the community. Be sure to bring a sign-up sheet with plenty of room to clearly write an e-mail address.

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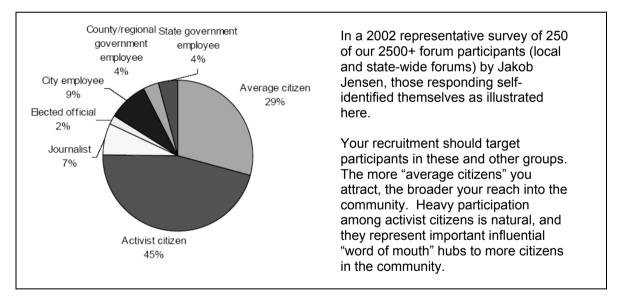www.e-democracy.gov.uk

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"The Four-Legged Stool" Model for recruitment

Target your recruiting effort with the "Four-Legged Stool" model of participation in mind.

1. One leg represents citizens, the lifeblood of any Local Issues Forum.

2. The second leg is the media. Participation by local journalists can exponentially expand the reach of your forum. They often write articles based upon or inspired by discussions that take place in Local Issues Forums, which adds value to the discussion and attracts new members.

3. The third leg is elected officials – while citizens can organise through the forum, it helps if those with political power can choose to take action based on their reading/participation. Once you have a few elected officials on board, others will feel pressure to pay attention, as well.

4. The fourth leg is the bureaucracy – people who are not policymakers but have valuable knowledge about the city. This can include community leaders, government administrators, particularly knowledgeable and respected community members and those involved with nonprofit/non-governmental organisations. They are often best positioned to quell rumors and provide valuable information about current controversies. They are sometimes reluctant to comment on issues publicly but can play a crucial role in distributing information and answering questions through private channels. Most importantly, they are often in a position to deal directly with issues that come up in the forum, sometimes resolving citizen complaints within hours.

When all four legs exist, power and people interact – with the media amplifying the reach of the forum through their articles and stories.

In a 2002 representative survey of 250 of our 2500+ forum participants (local and state-wide forums) by Jakob Jensen, those responding self-identified themselves as illustrated here.

Your recruitment should target participants in these and other groups. The more "average citizens" you attract, the broader your reach into the community. Heavy participation among activist citizens is natural, and they represent important influential "word of mouth" hubs to more citizens in the community.

6. Community Approach

Take an inclusive approach, not an activist "government or politicians are the problem" approach. While it's acceptable to criticize the performance of elected officials in the forum, that is not the purpose of the forum. Unlike many web forums, the rhetoric we use is not about "sounding off" or complaining, it is about bringing people with diverse views together for a civil discussion. Setting the right tone makes a world of difference. An effective online public space treats all members as equal "citizens," be they public officials, journalists, neighbourhood leaders, or the more elusive "average" citizen.

For citizens to take time from their already hectic schedules to participate in a Local Issues Forum, it must have some relevance within the community. Participants should feel as if their contributions matter and that someone is actually listening. For this reason, it's important to attract decision makers, journalists, and community leaders to your forum. It's important that these community leaders are invested in the success of the forum and do not feel as if they are simply targets or "shark bait", as one local official put it.

However, it's equally important that you not put too much emphasis on the active participation of elected officials. Strategic politicians will participate when they see the discussion as an effective agenda-setting tool, while others will play it safe and "lurk" in the background, reading messages and occasionally responding to participants privately. In general, only 10 percent to 20 percent of members in an online forum are "active" participants and post on a regular basis. However, the readers or "lurkers" play a critical role, as well. The knowledge that civic leaders and elected officials are "lurking" in the forum, gives the entire process added legitimacy and relevance. We've learned that oftentimes having a particular individual "read" a message can be more important than having them actively participate in the discussion. As the saying goes, "It's not what you know, it's who you know" or "who's reading your message" that can make the difference.

7. Launch Publicity

Be sure to open with a coordinated publicity campaign in the early stages. Send a press release to area media and follow-up with a telephone call. Yes, we said to follow up with a telephone call. Too often, E-Democracy advocates rely too much on e-communication. Sometimes, the best way to make an impression is with an old-fashioned telephone call.

Make sure that your press release, and every other printed communication, includes complete instructions on how to subscribe to the forum.

Consider using a special event to launch your Local Issues Forum – something like an online candidate debate or special discussion on a current topic of interest. It's often easier to get media attention for a special event than it is for the launch of a forum. At its conclusion, you can transition your special event into an ongoing Local Issues Forum.

8. Facilitate and Manage

Establish a facilitation team, with your forum manager at the core, that is able to capture and maintain the trust of participants. You will have much better success gearing the forum toward local issue discussions and away from flame wars if you first get on the good side of participants by building a trusting relationship.

Be firm, be fair, but remember the interests of the whole over the few individuals who are unwilling to follow forum rules. It's important to set the tone early and build credibility in the community.

See Section 3 (page 24) for more detailed suggestions on the management of your Local Issues Forum.

9. Be Patient and Persevere

Creating a sense of momentum is more important than a quick success. Don't make the mistake of getting discouraged (or at least showing it publicly) when things don't take off right away. Building a Local Issues Forum takes a lot of time and patience. You might get a burst of activity in the initial days, followed by a sudden drop in activity. People might stop participating altogether. This is normal; it takes time to establish your forum's identity and for participants to fully work it into their daily routine.

You might notice a cycle of participation in the early stages of a Local Issues Forum, in which every three to four days of activity are followed by several days of diminished participation, as participants trying to catch their breath. This is normal and can last for years. Don't fight it; use the slow days to recuperate and catch your own breath.

If things slow down for too long, try posting "discussion starters" or provocative questions. Play the role of a talk show host and introduce a controversial idea that is likely to stimulate some discussion. Behind the scenes, get others involved in your early attempts to build forum momentum. The more people who are actively posting, the more credibility and interest your forum will have to new participants. Try lots of different topics; it's very hard to predict which topics will "catch fire" in any given forum on any given day. Don't assume that because no one responded, the topic was unpopular. Try it again a week later, the next time from a different angle or with a different twist.

Remember, the participants of the forum will ultimately set the agenda – you are only there to make suggestions. Periodically, remind participants that the space belongs to them, and remind them how to start new discussion.

In short, be patient and keep at it.

10. Celebrate

Celebrate forum anniversaries, and encourage in-person gatherings at local venues to remind people that real people are on the other side of the forum postings. When members come together, it helps humanize the forum and personalize the discussion. Connecting geography and a sense of social accountability in the "real world" is vital to the forum. With real people using real names in a real place, vibrant and ongoing public discussions are something to celebrate.

Measuring Success

Once the forum is on its feet, its success is largely measured by whether the participants themselves generate discussions. Some community happening or event will spark a moment where the forum members themselves assume a sense of community ownership and forum destiny. TABLE 1.1 provides more detailed guidelines for where your forum should be in three, six, and 12 months from the date of launch. However, keep in mind that every community is different and Local Issues Forum will progress at differing rates.

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TABLE 1.1:	Success Measures
2-3 Months	• Forum is still active. • Some regular traffic. • Experiencing some membership growth. • City/community officials are aware of forum/maybe reading posts. • Some community organisations have begun to post announcements in forum.
6 Months	• 25 - 50 percent growth in subscriptions since launch. • Local media is to paying attention to discussions. • 10 or more "regular" posters (post at least once per week). • Participants are starting new discussions. • Regular participation in steering committee communications and meetings attract a diverse group of community members.
1 Year	• Elected officials and city/community staff are participating – most lurk, but some post. • 50 - 100 percent growth in subscriptions since launch. • Occasional story in local media that originates from forum. • Some examples of citizen or government action that have resulted from forum discussions. • You have hosted at least one in-person gathering or party for participants to meet one another.

What's Next?

As your Local Issues Forum begins to establish itself and develop its own identity, it's time to experiment and try new things. A Local Issues Forum can be the hub of many online or offline activities.

Here are a few suggestions about what to do next:

- Online candidate debates during election cycles.
- Partner with other community organisations to host complimentary online and "face-to-face" forums on important issues in your community – some call them "online consultations" or "e-consultations."
- Host online chat sessions or interviews with local decision-makers or elected officials.
- Create nonpartisan information guides.
- Host an E-Citizenship workshop that shows citizens:
  - How to access government information online
  - Get election information
  - Contact elected officials or government offices
  - Provide feedback on city initiatives
  - Connect with other local citizens on interests of common concern

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Section 2:
Citizens' Guide to Participating in a Local Issues Forum

Bringing the Meeting to You

In a democracy, the important decisions that affect our lives are often made or influenced by "those who show up." As much as most of us would like to be more involved, its difficult to find the time to "show up" at even a small portion of the meetings that take place near our homes every week. In addition, the media are often criticized for doing a poor job at covering local issues, so information can be hard to come by.

One of the promises of e-democracy is the ability to make public participation more flexible. To make it possible to retrieve information and contribute to public debate at a time and location that is convenient for you.

Internet technology makes it possible for parents to participate in public policy forums from their kitchens or after putting the kids to bed. Individuals can act as citizens at 2 a.m. or on a sunny afternoon while at the beach. In short, you can attend an Internet town meeting at any time of the day, from any location. But that doesn't mean you have to take the meeting with you everywhere you go. You have the option of leaving it behind or just turning it off.

We are not claiming that the Internet has removed all pain or inconvenience from being a citizen. As an e-citizen, you are not excused from all future face-to-face meetings. A Local Issues Forum is only a tool available to you, to make civic participation a more convenient and flexible option in a busy and hectic world. However, it does not replace the need to meet and interact with your neighbours or show up at a critical city council meeting. Ideally, your online participation will facilitate more traditional forms of social and political involvement within your local community.

What Is A Local Issues Forum?

Simply put, a Local Issues Forum is an online forum, such as a town hall meeting online or a public commons, where any citizen, journalist, or elected official can:
a
   • Post an idea,
   • Ask a question,
   • Make a public announcement,
   • Connect with one another,
   • Monitor public opinion,
   • Ask for public input, and
   • A place where journalists can look for story ideas or identify sources for articles.

The goal of a Local Issues Forum is to give everyone a greater voice in local decisions and encourage more citizen participation in local public policy making. It provides a forum for decision-makers to receive immediate feedback from the community on issues that must be decided or voted on in council.

One of the most important features of a Local Issues Forum is that it is citizen driven. Anyone can introduce a topic, concern or idea for discussion, as long as it relates to an issue that impacts the

quality of life in the local community. A Local Issues Forum empowers individual citizens to bring their ideas, suggestions and concerns to the forefront of public attention.

Survey Says …

We know that your initial expectations of what a forum is for, its purpose, etc. will determine your satisfaction and whether you will continue to participate. In short, keep your expectations reasonable.

In 2002, we asked a sample of forum participants how they thought Issues Forums are most similar (they selected one to three choices). Here is how they compared our forums with other forms of political participation:

Discussing politics with friends, colleagues or family	66
Participating in a meeting with other citizens	60
Writing letters to the editor for a newspaper or journal	33
Organizing grassroots activities	21
Attending a political party meeting	14
Contacting politicians by letter	12
Contacting politicians in person	6

We also found that 77 percent of forum participants said they felt the geographic boundaries on discussion topics were positive or very positive, which reinforces our belief in the importance of keeping it local.

For more survey results see *Appendix G* (Page 48).

Why Should Citizens Participate In A Local Issues Forum?

A dynamic community is one in which citizens' interact and work together in a variety of constructive ways. Unfortunately, we all lead busy lives and it is not always convenient to attend a local meeting or interact with your local elected official. A Local Issues Forum provides an alternative means for you to contribute to the civic health of your community in a flexible manner. Here are some reasons why you might want to participate:

Top 5 Reasons, Why A Citizen Should Participate	• Keep up with community happenings • Network with other local citizens • Ask questions – get useful information • Share your opinion on important local issues • Connect with elected officials and city staff

Top 5 Reasons, Why A Community Activist Should Participate	• Place to post announcements about meetings & events • Network with other community activists • Keep your local issue in front of the community • Keep your issue in front of the press • Keep up with community news missed by the media

Top 5 Reasons, Why A Journalist Should Participate	• Story ideas, don't be scooped by your competition • Background info • Place to find and evaluate new sources • Keep in touch with entire city/community • Place to post links to relevant stories you have written

Top 5 Reasons, Why A Community Needs a Local Issues Forum	• Alternative to other online forums, which often lack accountability and impact • Media accountability • Build civic capacity among citizens • Anytime, anywhere – brings in citizens who are otherwise excluded from the process due to time or space constraints • Public space for competition of ideas. Citizens have opportunity to experience competing demands for public attention/resources

Why Should/Do Elected Officials and Decision-Makers Participate?

Some decision makers/elected officials may be skeptical about the value of participating in a Local Issues Forum. They are concerned about becoming "too available" or getting "sucked" into another project. Here are some very practical reasons, why they might want to try it out:

Top 5 Reasons, Why An Elected Official Should Participate	• Fear of being left out of important discussions • A great place to float trial balloons • Instant citizen feedback • Early warning system for "hot" issues • Dispel rumors before they do damage

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How Does It Work?

With GroupServer, a Local Issues Forum is an online forum that combines an "e-mail discussion list" with a web forum. If you are active online, you probably have already encountered e-mail lists, web forums, and weblogs (or blogs) with comment spaces. When you want to share your thoughts with the Local Issues Forum, you send an email to one simple e-mail address or you post via the web and the "server" forwards your message via e-mail to the vast majority of participants and puts on the web for those who prefer to "go" to the forum rather than having it come to you. When anyone else on the forum sends a response to your message to the group e-mail address, their response is sent to other members of the forum. The result is an ongoing community discussion that conveniently takes place in your e-mail "in-box" and on the forum's web site.

Keep in mind, that your public messages to a Local Issues Forum are often forwarded to friends, distributed on other local e-mail lists, or incorporated in media coverage of the issue. Therefore, the impact of your Local Issues Forum extends beyond the immediate member base.

Possible outcomes of a discussion in your Local Issues Forum range from increased citizen awareness of a particular issue or problem to direct action by local government officials or agencies. See TABLE 2.1 for an illustration of several possible outcomes from any given post.

Your Local Issues Forum in Practice

Now that you have a general idea of how a Local Issues Forum works, feel free to browse the case studies distributed throughout this chapter, based upon the real-world experiences of actual Local Issues Forums.

TABLE-2.1: Different response scenarios to a post from Citizen A about excessive litter in local park		
Action	**Response**	**Result**
Citizen B (and others) read message	None	Citizen B (and others) have better understanding of litter problem
Citizen C reads message	Posts public comments to group on the issue	For several days, the issue of litter in parks is discussed – and many citizens become more aware of issue
Citizen D reads message	Publicly responds with similar concern	A group of citizens meet and organise a park clean-up
Citizen E reads message	Forwards to local city councilor – who forwards to Parks Department	A clean-up crew is dispatched to clean up the park (without any discussion in forum)
Local journalist reads message	Investigates and writes article about budget shortfall in Parks Department	Thousands of citizens read article and are more informed about budget shortfall in Parks Department and resulting litter problem.
Staff person in Parks Department reads message	Staff person calls Citizen A on the phone to ask for more information.	Litter problem in park is added to the Parks Department "to-do" list.
Local legislator reads message	Introduces bill in legislature to hire teenagers for park clean-up program	Teenagers are hired to clean-up parks.

How to Effectively Participate in a Local Issues Forum

People participate in a Local Issues Forum for a variety of reasons, from advocating for a particular project to keeping informed about what is happening in their community. Whatever your purpose for participating, it's worth thinking about how to make the most effective use of your time reading and posting messages to the forum. Here are some tips that will help you make better use of your time and get better results:

1. Keep in mind that you are posting to a forum of several hundred people who have diverse perspectives and interests. Accept the fact that some of them do not and probably never will agree with you. Don't expect to change their minds. Sometimes, it's necessary to simply share your point of view and then move on. Avoid acronyms and technical jargon.
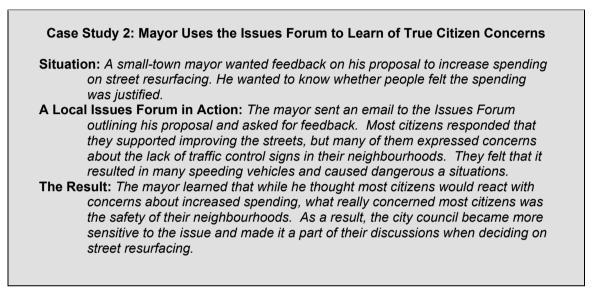
2. Short messages are the most effective. While it can be tempting particularly on a complex issue you feel strongly about to lay out a lengthy detailed argument of your position, a brief and on-point

message is more likely to be read and to generate responses. Participants often feel overwhelmed by long, dense messages and move quickly on to one that is more straightforward and targeted.

3. When possible, speak from personal experience rather than from ideology. Talking about your personal experiences in dealing with an issue creates for more compelling and persuasive reading that is easier for people to connect to. It also reinforces the "local" impact of the issue and makes it more likely people will respond in a constructive way even if they don't agree with you.

4. "Listen" and don't be afraid to ask a question. When you participate in a Local Issues Forum, try to think of yourself as engaging in a dialogue rather than a debate. In addition to stating your opinions, ask questions to try and understand others' views. People are more likely to pay attention to your point of view if they see that you are willing to listen to others and incorporate new ideas or facts into your perspective.

Case Study 2: Mayor Uses the Issues Forum to Learn of True Citizen Concerns

Situation: *A small-town mayor wanted feedback on his proposal to increase spending on street resurfacing. He wanted to know whether people felt the spending was justified.*

A Local Issues Forum in Action: *The mayor sent an email to the Issues Forum outlining his proposal and asked for feedback. Most citizens responded that they supported improving the streets, but many of them expressed concerns about the lack of traffic control signs in their neighbourhoods. They felt that it resulted in many speeding vehicles and caused dangerous a situations.*

The Result: *The mayor learned that while he thought most citizens would react with concerns about increased spending, what really concerned most citizens was the safety of their neighbourhoods. As a result, the city council became more sensitive to the issue and made it a part of their discussions when deciding on street resurfacing.*

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5. It's OK to delete messages and not read them. Don't feel that you need to read every message, every day. Having a busy day? Delete. The topic doesn't interest you? Delete. Some messages look more interesting than others? Delete. The most important thing to keep in mind is that you should use the Issues Forum in a way that works for you and fits with your schedule. It is always OK to take a break and delete messages without reading them and then resume your participation when your schedule permits.

6. Whenever possible, add information to the discussion. Local Issues Forums depend upon participants to share information when they have it. The quality and value of the discussions go up dramatically when individuals take the time to share information about a topic. Discussions based upon rumor and speculation are a source of frustration for everyone and damage the credibility of the forum. It's up to every participant to help raise the quality of forum by sharing facts and information when they are available.

7. Never post when you are angry. One of the advantages of an online discussion is that it takes place over time. You have the luxury of being able to think about your response before posting it. If something in the forum really gets you angry, wait an hour or two before responding. You're much less likely to post something that you'll later regret. If you feel an immediate urge to respond, write your reply right away, but hold it an hour before sending it. Reread it one last time and make necessary changes. Most often, you'll find yourself making major changes or even deleting the message entirely.

8. Reread your post before sending. It's always a good idea to read through your post one final time before sending it. You will often catch mistakes or refine your ideas, usually for the better. Unlike a verbal discussion, your posts to an online forum leave a permanent record of your comments, so make sure that you are going to be comfortable with the record that you are leaving.

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9. Use descriptive subject lines and trim excessive quotations. Many participants decide what messages to read, based upon the subject line. Make sure that the subject line is accurate and up to date. If you change the topic with one of your posts, be sure to change the subject line of your message. However, if you don't change the topic, then try and leave the subject line the same. Minor changes in the subject line, without good reason, sometimes frustrate other participants' ability to sort messages by subject and make it impossible for some email software to keep messages in a cohesive "thread." A good e-citizen always trims the unnecessary remnants of previous posts from his or her message. While it's nice to include (or quote) a small portion of a previous post, to put your comments into context, leaving too much is nuisance to other participants, especially those who read digest versions of the discussion.

10. Whenever possible, support your argument with a link to the source. One of the beauties of the Internet is the ability to link discussions with articles, information, and statistics. You don't have to ask people to take your word for it, you can actually point them to photos, news articles, or first-person accounts. If you are referencing something that you saw in the paper, provide a link to the actual article, so others have the option of looking it up themselves. This is a great way to boost your credibility and reinforce your point. However, be sure to include a link to the article, not the entire article itself, which might put you in violation of someone else's copyright.

11. Don't underestimate the power of your written words to hurt or insult others. One of the disadvantages of email or web-based discussions is the lack of body language or visual clues which are vital components of any face-to-face conversation. A few harsh words can do more damage in an email than they might under other circumstances. People are often surprisingly sensitive about things they read in an online forum. So, be careful about what you write and how people might perceive it.

Levels of Participation

At a minimum, you can increase your understanding of local issues simply by reading the forum (daily or weekly) even though you may never post a message. This simple, basic level of participation helps you understand what issues your neighbors are concerned about and helps you gain an appreciation of the competing arguments on controversial issues.

A higher level of participation would be for you to occasionally post a message when you have information that can help clarify what is being discussed. This is a way to share your specific knowledge and expertise with the community in a relatively easy and non-controversial way.

When to Post a Message	
Great Reasons to Post a Message:	**Watch Out for Posts That:**
- Introduce a new topic - Solicit ideas - Add/share information - Explain or clarify - Provide a personal perspective or reaction - Propose a solution - Synthesize ideas - Facilitate the discussion	- Attempt to discredit others who have opposing viewpoints, through sarcasm, labeling, or by "attacking the messenger". - Discouraging expression of alternative viewpoints

The highest level of participation would be for you to regularly engage in discussions and advocate on behalf of issues you think are important. This type of participation provides you with the greatest opportunity to impact the direction and quality of life in your community. However, it is also very time-consuming. Not everyone can or should participate at this level. Find the level of participation that best suits your circumstances at any given time and simply do your best. Even the lightest level of participation is of great value, it's better to have you there lurking in the forum than not to have you at all.

Explanation of Key Rules:

During its first 10 years, E-Democracy.Org developed a relatively comprehensive set of rules designed to facilitate our model of online public discussion. At the core are five key rules:

- All posts must be signed by the author's full and actual name.
- Two posts per person per day
- No personal attacks.
- Issues discussed must be local issues.
- The Forum Manager has the duty to warn and remove members who fail to comply with forum rules.

Let's take a brief look at each of these to understand their purpose and how they contribute to the discussion.

Key Rule #1: All posts must be signed by the author's full and actual name

Since this is a local community discussion, it is important for people to understand that those contributing to the discussion are their friends, neighbours and people within the community. Signing each post helps reinforce this point and helps build the online community. In addition, it encourages people to be thoughtful in their writing because they must take responsibility for their posts. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, research has shown that "anonymity" online is one of the biggest contributors to the harsh dialogue and "flame wars" that are so typical of other forms of online discussion. You will find that the signed messages help distinguish a Local Issues Forum from many of the other online discussions you may have participated in.

Key Rule #2: No individual may post more than two posts a day

The limitation on the number of messages posted by any one member serves two functions. First, it helps ensure that no individual dominates the discussion and that there is a diversity of viewpoints presented. Second, it helps limit the total number of messages each list member will receive in any one day.

Key Rule #3: No personal attacks

This is a very basic part of keeping the dialogue constructive and is embodied in the maxim "discuss issues, not individuals". A personal attack sours the discussion and creates a hostile environment in which many people will be reluctant to post messages.

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Key Rule #4: Issues discussed must be local issues

A Local Issues Forum is a place to discuss only local community issues. While national and international issues are important, they are not within the purpose and scope of a Local Issues Forum, and there are many other online forums that members can turn to if they would like to discuss those issues in addition to local issues. There are two ways to determine whether an issue is a "local" issue for purposes of the forum. If either of the following is true, the topic is appropriate one for the Issues Forum:

1. The issue is one that a local organisation or government entity has decision-making authority over. (For example, taxes imposed by a local government authority or a development conducted by a local business)

2. The issue is one that is being debated *primarily* at the local level, rather than at the regional or national level. (For example, while a national tax would certainly be of local concern, the debate would likely occur primarily at the national level, not the local level, so it would not be an appropriate topic for a Local Issues Forum.)

Key Rule #5: The Forum Manager has the duty to warn and remove members who fail to comply with forum rules

There is an expectation in a Local Issues Forum that every member will adhere to forum rules. The Forum Manager has the responsibility of enforcing those rules and has the power to suspend posting privileges from those who do not comply. See forum rules for details.

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Case Study 4: Government Administrator Uses the Issues Forum to Increase Public Understanding

Situation: *A community member was angry about how the local Parks Department had pruned the trees in the park. He thought it looked awful and saw it as "just another example of how thoughtless and incompetent our local government is".*

A Local Issues Forum in Action: *The citizen sent an email to his Local Issues Forum expressing his outrage on the issue. Other citizens agreed and it became clear that many people in the community shared his concerns.*

The Result: *The local government official responsible for the pruning of the trees responded publicly to the Issues Forum and explained why the trees needed to be pruned the way they were. He helped them understand that it was the best course of action for the health of the trees and would result in better looking trees in the long run. Forum members felt his explanation made sense and appreciated his thoughtfulness in deciding how to prune the trees. The local administrator was able to avert a minor controversy, while improving public perception of the performance of his department. Forum members were left with the feeling that their local government was more competent and responsive than they may have thought previously.*

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Section 3:
The Forum Managers' Guide

The forum manager is critical to the success of any E-Democracy.Org Local Issues Forum. He or she keeps the space "safe" for constructive dialogue, initiates new topics for discussion, and protects the credibility of the forum in the eyes of the public. Finding and nurturing your forum manager is especially critical in the early stages of a Local Issues Forum.

In our 2002 participant survey, 86 percent of respondents indicated that our forum managers play a "positive" role in making our forums an ideal space for online dialogue, participation, and civic involvement. In fact, more than 53 percent rated the role of forum manager as "very positive".

E-Democracy.Org forum managers are a hearty group of volunteers, willing to set aside any personal political agenda in the name of creating or maintaining an open online civic space for public dialogue. This does not mean that forum managers are prohibited from expressing opinions within the forum. As volunteers, our forum managers maintain their rights to participate in forum discussions and express their personal points of view. However, we do expect that when participating as citizens, forum managers behave in a manner that models good participation skills to other participants.

One key lesson for any E-Democracy.Org forum manager is *to not take the discussion for granted*. Many people who start online discussions assume that once enough people are signed up, the discussion will simply just go and won't need any attention. We ask our forum managers to adopt an approach of always thinking about what is happening on the forum, to ask themselves if the discussion is good, to consider things they might do to help the discussion like introducing new topics. Most of all, we encourage forum managers to show leadership and take personal responsibility for working to improve the quality of the discussion.

In selecting a forum manager or deciding whether to take the job, here are some things to consider:

Forum Manager Job Description

The forum manager is both the caregiver and enforcer within the forum. He or she must respond to participant questions, provide some basic level of technical support to users, and enforce forum rules. The forum manager is responsible for maintaining the "safety" and credibility of the forum, while encouraging and promoting healthy participation.

The position of forum manager is a volunteer commitment of at least two to three hours per week, depending upon the level of activity within the forum and the amount of support provided by other volunteers. The forum manager may work from home, coffee shop, the beach, or anywhere else he or she can find Internet access.

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Qualifications - What Makes a Good Forum Manager:

- A sincere belief in the value of dialogue and citizen participation.
- A respect for diverse political ideologies.
- Patience.
- People skills – an ability to remind participants of the rules and gently guide their behavior without putting them on the defensive or inflaming the situation.
- Thick skin and an ability to handle public criticism.
- General comfort with Local Issues Forum technology. Does not need to be a technology expert or programmer – a simple understanding of how the forum management software works is sufficient.
- Political common sense and an ability to make sense of discussions in the forum, ask good questions, and recognize when things are going astray.

10 Specific Tasks of the Forum Manager (details below):

- Keeping the space "safe/civil" for all participants,
- Encouraging/enforcing compliance with forum rules,
- Keeping the discussion on topic,
- Managing message volume,
- Introducing new topics,
- Encouraging alternate viewpoints,
- Supporting and encouraging good behavior,
- Welcoming new members, and
- Responding to participant questions/complaints.

Some of these tasks can be divided up among a group of volunteers, however we strongly recommend that public forum direction statements and rules enforcement be handled by one individual. It's important to maintain some level of consistency and accountability for these core tasks.

1. Keeping the space "safe/civil" for all participants

The success of your Local Issues Forum will largely be determined by the quality of the participation that you get and the diversity of viewpoints present in your forum. Many people will participate by simply reading the messages. They may never post anything themselves. This is a valid and valuable method of participation.

However, to encourage citizens and elected officials to post messages and actively participate in the forum, it's important that the forum manager promote and encourage a respectful and constructive atmosphere within the forum, free of personal attacks and insults. E-Democracy.Org rules require that all participants treat each other with civility and respect.

Every Local Issues Forum is made up of a variety of participants with differing definitions of personal attack or insult. Some participants have very thick skins and are generally unfazed by personal attacks, while others are easily offended and unwilling to share personal opinions for fear of criticism. While an E-Democracy.Org Local Issues Forum cannot be all things to all people, it must be able to keep the attention of a wide range of people if it is to remain politically relevant. In order to ensure broad participation, the forum manager must take the time to address the needs of the various participants in the forum by carefully monitoring the discussion and addressing those elements that will promote their participation.

A key element in creating a civil environment is that the forum manager *keeps the discussion focused on ideas and NOT individuals.* While this may seem fairly self-explanatory, its importance can't be underestimated.

Any comments that might be construed as a personal attack on another member of the forum should be dealt with quickly. Generally, if there is a personal attack within the forum, it is a good course of action to email the offender, letting that individual know that he or she 'broke a rule", and then email the victim to let them know that you dealt with the issue. In some cases, if the discussion is getting a

little heated but hasn't crossed the line yet, preventative action can do the trick. A general post to the forum reminding people to keep focused on issues can be helpful. If an individual continues to engage in personal attacks after being warned by the forum manager, he or she should be removed from the forum according to the procedures outlined in the forum rules.

2. Encouraging, Enforcing Compliance with Forum Rules

The forum manager also has the difficult role of encouraging compliance with forum rules and taking action when they are broken. E-Democracy.Org rules provide a very clear framework for when and how to discipline forum members for inappropriate behavior. However, the forum manager has room for discretion. Managing an E-Democracy.Org forum is more art than science, which means forum managers must have flexibility in how they do their job. At the same time, E-Democracy.Org provides an appeals process for participants who feel that the forum manager has not acted appropriately in enforcing the rules.

Here are a few tips for rules enforcement:

- It's generally better to deal with rules violations in private. Offenders are less likely to get defensive, if contacted politely and in private. Occasionally, though, some offenses are extreme or widespread enough that it's most efficient to tell people publicly what you're doing about it. However, that should be the exception.

- When you're penalizing someone in a one-on-one debate with another member who has also broken the rules, let them each know the other is being disciplined so they don't feel they are being unfairly singled out.

- Don't hold grudges. Always discipline according to the rules. If you are angry over an incident, allow time to "cool down" before making a ruling (unless the situation is one that requires immediate attention).

- Feel free to use informal cautions as an alternative to formal warnings for lesser offenses or first time offenses. When you give a caution, let the participant know that multiple cautions can result in a formal warning.

- ALWAYS keep a record of your warnings and explicitly recount the offense and the specific rule that was broken. A good record will help justify a decision if the member appeals your decision. It will also help you keep track of dates and will help you be more objective in your decision-making.

- Any expulsion message should be saved and copied to your governing board or advisory committee. It should cite the offense and the rule and reference previous warnings if the list rules require multiple warnings for expulsion.

- Sometimes they are right. You have to accept, upon reflection, that you might have issued a warning incorrectly. You can rescind them. Also, respect your organisation's view if you are overruled during an appeal.

3. Keeping the Discussion on Topic

One of the roles that a facilitator must perform is to make judgments as to whether topics of discussion are appropriate for the list and, if not, whether they can be brought back "on topic". Because individual expectations will differ among list members, it is important for the forum manager to know the mission/purpose of the list and work to make sure the discussion is in keeping with it.

4. Managing Message Volume

The forum manager should always remain conscious of the traffic in the forum. Too many or not enough messages can be cause for some concern, if these conditions last too long.

A lull in forum traffic can often be dealt with by posting a link to a controversial article on a topic of concern in your community or by asking a provocative question. Spikes in traffic are often caused by rumors in the community or breaking news. Sometimes it's possible to calm an overactive forum, by simply finding good and up-to-date information and posting it publicly. If the forum is getting too busy, one might also look for topics that are inappropriate for the forum and put an end to them or try to bring some focus to a topic that has gotten out of control.

As much as possible, the forum manager should work to promote a consistent message volume that is neither too high nor too low. To that extent, topics can be introduced for two reasons:

1. To increase message volume during a lull in postings.
2. To begin discussion of a significant local topic of current interest that has not been introduced to the list by a participant.

5. Introducing New Topics

There are several reasons why the forum manager might want to introduce a new topic:

- To generate activity in an overly quiet forum.
- To draw attention to an important community issue which has not yet come up in the forum, possibly an issue of concern to a group in the community which is underrepresented in the forum.
- To divert attention away from an unhealthy or unproductive discussion.

Sometimes it's necessary to introduce a fun or light topic, to reduce accumulated tension in the forum. Some ideas:

- What's your favorite thing about your community?
- What one thing from the past do you most miss about your city or community?
- What's the best family activity in town?
- Where is the biggest tree in your community?
- What unusual wildlife has been spotted within the confines of your community?
- Who is the most colorful character associated with your community?

Where to find good topics:

- Scan the local newspaper and post links to articles of local relevance.
- Scan community newspapers or newsletters for issues that have not previously come up in the forum, then ask participants to comment on them.
- Announce an upcoming event.
- Ask someone to report on a community meeting that they attended. Who was there? What happened? What decisions, if any, were made?
- Scan the city or council web site and report on anything new that you find.

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6. Encouraging Alternate Viewpoints

The more polarized a discussion gets, the more likely it will break down into a name calling contest and scare participants away. The forum manager can help avoid some of that polarization by encouraging and inviting individuals with moderate or alternative viewpoints to add to the discussion. The more perspectives that the group can bring to a particular issue, the more thoughtful and constructive the discussion is likely to be.

Sometimes, when a discussion is getting out of hand, it helps to simply summarize what has been said so far or to look for areas of agreement among the "combatants." Often, the most hostile debates are between participants who are talking about entirely different things. The forum manager can sometimes calm them down by drawing their attention to this fact.

Participants should also be discouraged from labeling other participants, e.g..right-wingers or socialists. Remember, the purpose of the forum is to discuss ISSUES not EACH OTHER.

7. Provide Positive Reinforcement of Constructive Posts

An important role the forum manager can play in actively working to improve the quality of discussion is to look for, and positively reinforce, posts that demonstrate constructive dialogue. This can be done either online or offline. If someone makes an exceptionally good comment, go ahead and email them offline to let them know it was a great post. The forum manager can also positively reinforce the post online by posting a message in the context of the discussion that builds on the previous post and acknowledges its good elements.

This is especially important when a newcomer or "lurker" posts for the first time. If no one responds to a newcomer's post, it sends a signal to that person as well as other "lurkers" who are already hesitant to post. A brief offline message, thanking them for posting and providing some supportive comments about their message, will encourage them to post again. This is important because the discussion will always benefit from more active participation by a larger group of people.

8. Reinforcing the Forum's Purpose to New Members

An individual's satisfaction level with a Local Issues Forum is largely related to the expectations they had when they joined. Different people will join your Local Issues Forum with radically differing ideas about what to expect and about what is expected of them. The sooner you are able to clarify the purpose, rules, and participation guidelines to each new member, the less likely they are to become frustrated and cause you difficulties.

It's helpful to post periodic reminders to the forum so that even the experienced participants get an occasional refresher.

9. Customer Service – Responding to Participants' Questions and Complaints

Participants will, from time to time, have questions, concerns, or frustrations about the forum. Keeping a broad and diverse base of participation means taking the time to respond to those questions AND complaints when they occur. While this task can be distributed among several people, it's useful to have the forum manager be the point person. It's important to acknowledge complaints, even if you don't have the time or inclination to respond to them in detail. It is also necessary to recognize that each participant has different comfort levels with technology and that things that seem obvious to you are often a puzzle to some other people. From time to time, it will be necessary to help participants with simple tasks like unsubscribing or changing their subscription to a digest format.

10. Recruiting List Members to Encourage Positive Dialogue

If you watch the dynamics of an online group over time, you'll notice that it will develop a set of norms of participation (i.e. what is appropriate and expected behavior) and then the group will enforce those norms. These norms can encompass the formal list rules but also have a lot to do with things such as

what topics are discussed and the tenor of the discussion. The enforcement of these norms is often unconscious and forum members are unaware that they are doing it.

With this in mind, it is possible for a forum manager to establish a cadre of participants who consciously work to promote and encourage a particular desired set of norms, for example, by encouraging members who post thoughtful questions, are interested in alternative perspectives, and are able to respectfully disagree with each other – while discouraging "ranters," "whiners," and the "trolls" who spend their time deliberately trying to provoke other participants.

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Appendix A:
Checklist For Setting Up a Local Issues Forum

❑ Step One – Identify steering committee and forum manager

❑ Step Two – Hold a workshop for key volunteers

❑ Step Three – Create charter, goals, and rules

❑ Step Four -- Set a launch date

❑ Step Five – Send out a press releases announcing the effort

❑ Step Six– Consider holding a public event (with a speaker and agenda) to generate interest

❑ Step Seven – Target and recruit participants

❑ Step Eight -- Determine opening discussion topics

❑ Step Nine – Launch

❑ Step Ten – Continue recruitment and media-awareness

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Appendix B:
Sample Charters

While charters may be written from scratch, here are samples from two forums.

Minneapolis Issues Forum

The Minneapolis Issues Forum is an e-mail announcement and discussion forum on public issues in Minneapolis. Discussions of a substantive and respectful nature are expected on this city-wide, issue-based forum.

Discussion topics include agenda items or issues that you feel should be addressed by the:

- Minneapolis City Council
- Mayor of Minneapolis
- Minneapolis School Board
- The Minneapolis Park Board, Library Board, and Neighbourhood Revitalization Program
- Minneapolis-related items before the Hennepin County Board
- Items on the agenda of other publicly elected or appointed boards and councils in Minneapolis.
- Minneapolis-related items before the Minnesota House and Senate

Official bodies and civic organisations are highly encouraged to send meeting announcements, agendas, and information on new online resources in text format to the forum.

General discussions among Minneapolitans outside the charter scope must be taken to other online forums. This community forum welcomes and encourages a diversity of opinions and backgrounds. This forum is about open exchange and information sharing and not about being right with one's ideology. Attempts to "win" an online discussion are discouraged. The rules summary is below. This forum is governed by the full E-Democracy.Org forum rules.

Brighton & Hove Issues Forum Charter

The Brighton & Hove Issues Forum is a place on the web where you can discuss the local issues that matter to you. It is a place where people living in Brighton & Hove come together to exchange ideas, opinions, and information on local affairs. The local council and other local organisations will be looking at what we do, so your views can make a difference.

Topics that you might find here to discuss include:

- Community issues that matter to you - from schools, local policing, parks, and libraries to issues in front of community or neighbourhood groups.
- Matters being discussed by the local council or local issues that you feel should be addressed by the council or the government.
- Stories in local newspapers, radio stations or other local media.

This is a forum for everybody, but discussions must be polite and respectful of the views of others. Racist, violent, or otherwise hateful statements will not be tolerated.

We view everyone who joins, whatever their job or position, as "citizens". Everyone who participates does so on an equal footing, with no special obligations or responsibilities. This is our space, a citizen space.

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Participation Rules

By taking part in these discussions, you accept the full rules of the forum. You can read these rules by clicking on the link below: Full rules to the forum (click here).

Highlighted rules:

- Please discuss local issues only
- Be fair, calm and polite at all times
- Sign your messages with your full real name
- Expect warnings and possible removal for rule violations
- Please do not post more than two messages a day

Who runs this forum?

The Brighton & Hove Issues Forum is hosted by volunteers on the Brighton & Hove E-Democracy committee. E-Democracy.Org is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, citizen-based initiative launched in 1994. Our local steering committees select the volunteer forum manager(s) who helps facilitate the forum and administer the rules. You may contact local volunteers and the forum manager via their local web comment form.

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Appendix C:
The Guide to Virtual Door-Knocking

The most important requirement for successfully opening a community-based online public issues forum is participant recruitment. In order to build a forum that has interesting and relevant discussions in a real world sense, you need real people.

You need both those currently active in the community, as well as "average citizens" to join in order to establish a dynamic and self-sustaining forum. We highly recommend against starting discussions in an open issue forum that does not have at least 100 subscribers (fewer if your town is under 25,000 in population). The more who join from the start, the more people who will feel a real sense of ownership and a responsibility to share their community knowledge and ideas.

Recruitment is a one-person-at-a-time effort. You can also add one-group-at-a-time efforts. There is no easy way to recruit people from a specific city or region online. There is no "send to all" or "send to the involved" list that will allow you to send an invitation to people within a specific geographic community.

Local traditional media attention is key, but before you open your forum consider organising a "virtual door knock." A "virtual door knock" is where you visit local web pages, look for some expression of community interest, and then cut and paste its (or a small group of addresses) e-mail address into a personalized invitation. Don't send e-mail to just anyone in your community. If you do a bit of pre-screening, only a couple people out of 100 will be upset - no big deal. If people put their e-mail address on a web page it can generally be viewed as an invitation to send "appropriate" e-mail.

Building digital democracy is as difficult as building traditional democracy – in fact they are the same thing using different and complementary tools.

Organise specific volunteers to cover the following categories and send tailored invitations as they search. Give them specific areas and be sure to have one person make sure that there is no overlap and that the work is completed with a specific timeframe.

Possible Categories:

- Local governing bodies and elected officials
- Other public/quasi-public bodies
- Local public libraries
- School governing bodies
- Social science teachers for their students
- Local universities - administration, student leaders, faculty organisations, political science departments
- Clubs
- Civic organisations – chambers of commerce, trade unions
- Neighbourhood associations
- Local places of worship
- Local Internet companies

Also send a press release and invitation to journalists to:

- Television stations
- Radio stations
- Newspapers – daily circulation
- Newspapers - weekly/neighbourhood circulation
- Newspapers – student-operated
- Local online directory/news sites

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You will want at least one subscriber on your forum from every media organisation. This will help establish the forum as an agenda-setting space and encourage discussions. If you have an online discussion and no one is listening, did you really have a discussion?

While old politics is based on the information you control, new online politics can be based on the information you share. Those who seek to influence the community agenda through the issue forum will learn that over time. However, you need to kick start the forum to establish it as a significant local public opinion development space.

So get out there, Local Issues Forum, and recruit the people in your community required to build it as a vital public space in the real life of your community.

Sample "Virtual Door-Knocking" Letter

```
Dear _____,

I'm sending this e-mail because I know that, in the past, you've taken an
interest in helping to make [insert name of local area] a better community,
and I wanted to invite you to participate in [insert name of Local Issues
Forum].  I apologise if you've already received an e-mail invitation from
someone else to join the forum, but I wanted to make sure you weren't
overlooked.

[insert name of Local Issues Forum] is an ongoing, community-wide discussion
via e-mail about issues that affect life in [insert name of local
community]. It is scheduled to begin [insert launch date] and will include a
cross-section of community members, members of the media, and local leaders
such as council officials, school board members, and state representatives
[replace these examples with your own local official designations]. The goal
of [insert name of Local Issues Forum] is to give everyone a greater voice
in decisions that affect the community, increase civic participation, and
help to encourage more input into solutions to local problems. This will be
a great resource for elected officials and community leaders to get a feel
for what is important to the community and receive immediate feedback from a
broad cross-section of the community on issues that must be decided and/or
voted on.

Participation in [insert name of Local Issues Forum] requires very little
time commitment on your part. To get started, you simply [insert detailed
instructions for joining the Issues Forum].

After subscribing, you will be a part of the discussion and will receive a
copy of all e-mails that are sent to the list (probably a couple a day). Any
time you want to provide your input, you simply send your message to [insert
email address here] and it will be sent to everyone on the forum. If you'd
like more information, you can visit the [insert name of Local Issues Forum]
website at [insert URL here]

You can help assure a successful start to [insert name of Local Issues
Forum] by inviting your friends and neighbours to join the discussion.
Please feel free to forward the details of this message to them. Also, by
joining the discussion now, you will become one of the founding group
members. Please e-mail [insert contact email address here] to let us know if
we may list you as a Founding Group Member in our promotional materials. I
hope to see you join the discussion.

Please let me know if I can answer any questions for you.

Thanks,

[insert your name here]
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Short Outreach Note – General Public

```
Invitation to new Brighton & Hove Issues Forum
-- http://e-democracy.org/brighton-hove --
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Hello,

I am part of a team which is launching a new online forum for everyone in Brighton and Hove. It is going to be a place where everybody can talk about the issues that affect them, or interest them, to do with our City.

What are your views on the fight over plans for the new football stadium? What do you think about speed cameras? Are there problems with graffiti near you? Come and tell the forum, and together we can try to work out some solutions.

The forum is an independent project, run by volunteers whose only interest is to improve the working of local democracy. The city council and other local organisations will be watching what happens on the forum closely, so your voice might be heard by people with the power to make a difference.

We'd like you to be one of the first group of Brighton and Hove people that joins our new forum. It is easy to join. Sign-up on the web site now at:

> http://e-democracy.org/brighton-hove

You can choose to participate via email or over the web. To take part, all you need is an email address and access to the web - available free at your local library. Please tell your friends about this new public forum.

Thanks,

YOUR NAME
Volunteer
Brighton & Hove E-Democracy

Longer Introduction Early in Process to Civic Leaders

Dear

We are writing to invite you to join the initial team piloting a Newham Local Issues Forum.

The Newham Issues Forum is an initiative being taken under the auspices of E-Democracy.org working with the UK Local E-democracy National Project to establish pilot Local Issues Forums in the UK. Its aim is to support local democracy through the creation of a viable "any time, anywhere" participation option that complements time- and place-restricted forms of public involvement.

It is anticipated that participation in the Newham Local Issues Forum will be mainly via an email discussion list, although there is a web-based interface.

The forum, when fully launched, will succeed on the basis of participation by citizens living, studying or working in Newham, by councilors, by council officers, and by local media. Newham residents are expected to constitute the highest proportion of the membership. Membership and participation, however, are not restricted and are open to anyone interested in Newham issues.

Prior to a full public launch of the forum we are seeking to sign up 200 users to trial the system and to later constitute a core membership, familiar with the protocols for participation and, therefore, able to help others by way of example or advice.

Among the protocols are the following rules taken from the full list on the E-Democracy site:

1.   Real names are used
2.   There is a limit to the number of posts that a member
       can make per day
3.   Topics are kept within the forum purpose
4.   Civility is the prime condition for participation

Please note also that list members will be able to control the volume of email that they receive by choosing whether to receive each post, to receive posts periodically in digest form, or to view posts on the web instead of receiving them by email.

The advantage of working with an organisation such as E-Democracy.org is that we are able to draw on a decade of experience in the setting up of citizens' forums.

If you are willing to join the forum at this stage, please reply to this email. Your name will be added to the Newham Team list and on notification you will be able to start taking part in online discussions by emailing newham-team@forums.e-democracy.org.

Best wishes,

Volunteer Name
On behalf of the Newham Local Issues Forum Steering Group

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Appendix D:
Recruitment Checklist and Sample Sign-Up Form

❑ Send a personal invitation to all local elected officials and their staff. Encourage them to forward it to their interested constituents and their own e-mail lists, and to mention it in replies to citizen e-mail.

❑ Ask members of the steering committee to go through their address books and invite colleagues and friends. They should also post to private or internal group lists within their organisation(s).

❑ Contact journalists that cover local issues in your area and ask them to sign up. You should also provide them a press release but focus on getting them to join.

❑ Ask local public e-mail list owners to post an announcement or invitation. Post directly to the open lists you are on with a personalized note.

❑ Provide text to be distributed via announcement e-mail lists and/or print newsletters of government and community organisations.

❑ Print out a local version of the sign-up sheet and bring it to community events and council meetings to sign people up.   See: http://e-democracy.org/uk/ifsignupform.doc

❑ Invite the mayor or other high-level local officials to circulate an invitation around city hall or council offices to civil servants.

❑ Ask major web sites in the community to provide a link and/or write a story.

❑ Contact local bloggers and ask them to blog it and link in their blog roll.

❑ Post invitations on select web forums. It is a good idea to check with the host of other forums to explain how your forum complements their forums before posting. If posting to forums with radically different cultures, be sure to mention how the Local Issues Forum uses real names and has daily posting limits.

❑ Ask a councilor from each political party to use the paper form to sign-up fellow councillors and policy staff. This is one option for getting the form into city hall decision-making circles.

❑ Design a simple flyer for cafes and public notice boards with the web address on a rip-off tab.

❑ Ask to present at local service club meetings such as the Rotary, Lions Club, or groups such as the chamber of commerce, labour unions, and local party meetings (must do them all to be nonpartisan). Target diverse communities.

❑ Ask local libraries and other community Internet access points if you can place a tri-fold sign next to computers to promote the forum.

❑ Raise some funds to hire a recruitment coordinator for the first 90 days of the forum.

Community Issues Forum
E-MAIL FORUM SIGN-UP FORM

Please print your name, community/neighbourhood, and your e-mail address on this form. You will be added to your Local Community Issues Forum online discussion. You may easily unsubscribe at any time and participate fully via the web or e-mail – your choice.

To receive announcements and discuss local community issues, carefully write your e-mail address on this form.

Name: Community/Neighbourhood:

E-mail:

Name: Community/Neighbourhood:

E-mail:

Name: Community/Neighbourhood:

E-mail:

Name: Community/Neighbourhood:

E-mail:

Name: Community/Neighbourhood:

E-mail:

Download the full UK form from E-Democracy at
http://www.e-democracy.org/uk

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Appendix E:
Sample Forum Opening Messages

The first few posts to a newly opened forum are very important in terms of setting the tone and expectations for the discussions to follow. Experience suggests to us, that participants are more likely to read and understand complicated emails, if they are broken up into shorter and more focused messages. We recommend launching your new forum with two to four short emails that convey some of the important information that new members need to understand. Here are four sample posts that might be used as is or modified to meet the needs of a specific Local Issues Forum.

Post 1
Welcome Message

```
Welcome to the _____ Issues Forum:

Thanks to all of you who have helped build this forum and recruit the
initial 100 participants. Today we are launching what we hope to be a new
form of citizen participation in our community — a place where citizens,
city staff, elected officials, and the local media can meet to exchange
information and opinions on issues important to our community.

Most of you are subscribed to participate in this discussion via email and
can expect an average of between five and 10 email messages daily AFTER the
busier introductions period. We know this type of forum is new to many of
you, so don't worry, no one expects you to read every post.

Here are several tips for managing this email:

1) Feel free to delete messages when you are too busy to read them or if the
subject line does not interest you. Participants are not expected to read
everything in the forum.

2) Set up a filter (use the "Rules Wizard" in Outlock) to sort all of your
messages from this forum into one convenient folder.

3) You can get a daily digest (instead of every individual email), which
provides links to the most recent messages in our archive. You can change
your subscription to "digest" by sending an email message to the forum with
"digest on" in the subject line:

        _____@forums.e-democracy.org
    (i.e. - newham-issues@forums.e-democracy.org)

You may also change your email settings at our web site (you will need to
log in):

    http://forums.e-democracy.org/_____/   (MAKE SURE TO FILL THIS IN)
    (i.e. - http://forums.e-democracy.org/newham/ )

Digest members may browse and read all topics of interest and post directly
to the forum, via our web interface, if properly logged into the site.


Best wishes,

<Name of Forum Manager>
<Name of Forum>
```

Post 2
Rules and Expectations

```
Here is a quick reminder about the rules and expectations of the _____
Issues Forum.

The most important rules to keep in mind are:

  1) Each person is limited to 2 posts per day.
  2) Discussions in this forum are limited to topics
     specific to _____. This is not a place to discuss
     national or international issues.
  3) Be respectful. We do not allow name calling
     or personal attacks in this forum.
  4) Every post must be "signed" with a full name and neighbourhood.

        Gavin Sealey
        West Riverplace (I made this up)

Every participant is responsible for knowing all of the rules, which can be
found at:

   http://e-democracy.org/rules/

The forum manager is responsible for monitoring the list, reminding
participants to adhere to the rules, and enforcing the rules, if necessary.
Participants who receive more than one "official" warning from the list
manager may be suspended from the forum for at least two weeks (see complete
rules for details).

Best wishes,

Forum Manager Signature
```

Post 3
Introductions

```
(Template – made sure to update for your forum and remove all unnecessary
"hard returns". Use whatever schedule for introductions that you feel
necessary, or none at all.)
-----------------------------------------------------

To help us launch the forum, we'd like to have as many members as possible
introduce themselves to the group and tell us a little bit about the LOCAL
issues that they would like to see discussed in our forum, in the weeks and
months to come.

To help us manage the volume of email, we'd like to suggest that those with
last names beginning with A through L introduce themselves today or
tomorrow. Those with last names beginning with M through Z should join in
anytime after that.

Post your introduction to the following address:

        _____@forums.e-democracy.org

Please note, that hitting REPLY will not send a message to the forum. You
will need to make sure that the correct address is in the "TO" field of your
message.

Best wishes,
<Forum Manager Signature>
```

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Post 4
Recruitment

(You can send this, or something like it, whenever you like. I would suggest waiting until a few people have posted introductions. Once your forum is open, use the forum actively to reach your recruitment goals.)

Help us reach our goal of 200. Modify this message and
forward it to at least three people that you know.

Subject: New Brighton & Hove Issues Forum - Join us

Brighton & Hove Issues Forum

Are you interested in local issues? Whether you'd like to share your
ideas or read what others have to say, we'd like you to be there for the
launch
of our new online local issues forum.

We are inviting local citizens, community leaders, journalists, and elected
officials to participate in this new community-based project.

It is easy to join.

Sign-up via the web site now from:
    http://e-democracy.org/brighton-hove

Or send the word "subscribe" in the subject line to:
    bh@forums.e-democracy.org

You can participate via e-mail (the simple default) or via the web -
your choice.

Please tell your friends about this new agenda-setting
"any time, anywhere" public forum. The forum is organised by local
citizens and is non-commercial and nonpartisan.

Pass this note on to those interested in being involved the future of
our community. Based on the interest in our steering committee, we
know that the "who's who" of the local community will show up. Your
help passing this note on so the diverse voices in our community are
also heard is greatly appreciated.

Thanks,

Volunteer
Brighton & Hove E-Democracy

P.S. Full details including the full Brighton & Hove Issues Forum
charter and rules are available from the web site:
    http://e-democracy.org/brighton-hove

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Appendix F:
E-Democracy Forum Rules

This is the official text of the E-Democracy Rules as of March 2005. The current version is always available from: http://E-Democracy.Org /rules

These rules are not your usual legalistic approach; they have evolved based of real-world experience and form the fundamental foundation upon which Local Issues Forums are established, governed, and facilitated.

E-Democracy Rules

These rules are the basis for all E-Democracy.Org-sponsored citizen-to-citizen discussion forums - including e-mail discussion lists, web forums, and other online events.

You have a right to participate. The following rules of participation define accountability and the limited powers of volunteer forum managers and E-Democracy.Org.

Based on a decade of experience, these rules provide a citizen-based foundation for online civility by focusing on public issues in order to promote effective public agenda-setting through dialogue. These online public forums are about the sharing of ideas and information rather than being right with one's ideology or winning an argument. Our forums are not designed for debating abstract political philosophy or ridiculing others for their beliefs, backgrounds, or speculative motivations.

The purpose statement in each forum charter defines a forum's scope. A charter may establish additional rules and highlight essential rules. The rules are further supported E-Democracy.Org's constitution and by-laws. As the legal forum host, E-Democracy.Org seeks to exercise your public trust by responsibly mediating conflict among member rights and expectations for the benefit of the community.

Participants are responsible for reading and understanding these rules. By participating you agree to the spirit of a forum's purpose and these rules.

Rules Summary

1. **Sign Posts** - Use your real name.

2. **Limits on Posting** - Two per member per day in most forum charters.

3. **Keep Topics within Forum Purpose** - Local issues on a local forum, for example.

4. **Be Civil** - This is a public forum with real people. Respect among citizens with differing views is our cornerstone.

5. **No Attacks or Threats** - This keeps the forums safe. If content is illegal it will be forwarded to the proper legal authorities.

6. **Private Stays Private** - Don't forward private replies without permission.

7. **Avoid False Rumors** - Asking for clarification of what you've heard in the community can be appropriate if issues-based. You alone are responsible for what you post.

8. **Right to Post and Reply** - Sharing your knowledge and opinions with your fellow citizens is a democratic right.

9. **Items Not Allowed in Forums** - No attachments, etc.

10. **Public Content and Use** - You are sharing your content, but you retain your copyright.

11. **Warnings** - You may receive informal or official warnings from the Forum Manager.

12. **Suspension** - With your second official warning in one year, you are suspended for two weeks. It goes up from there.

13. **Appeals Process** - You can appeal a warning(s) once you receive a third warning and six-month removal. About one in 1,500 forum members each year have appealed a six-month removal in past years.

Full Rules

1. Sign Posts - All forum posts must be signed at the bottom of every message by the author with their real first and last name, and city and/or neighbourhood. Posting with a pseudonym, anonymously or the use/theft of another person's identity is strictly forbidden and has special penalties described under Warnings #7.

2. Limits on Posting - Participants must follow any posting frequency limits (often two (2) per day per person) when established in a forum charter. Participants must not post messages about topics that are specifically not allowed in a forum's charter.

3. Keep Topics within Forum Purpose - Requests by the forum manager to bring discussions within the scope of the forum must be followed or warnings may be issued. Limit posts to topics within the geographic area or issues related a forum's scope.

4. Be Civil - No insults, name calling or inflamed speech. Personal one-on-one arguments, disagreements or personality conflicts are not appropriate on the public discussion forum.   The forum manager shall provide guidance to participants on what is appropriate and what is not allowed. Attempts at humor or sarcasm should be labeled ... ;-), :-), etc.

5. No Attacks or Threats - Personal attacks or public threats against the safety or security of participants are not allowed. The forum manager may issue warnings or remove participants based on their public posts to a forum legally owned by E-Democracy.Org. If you receive private communication from another participant that causes you serious concern, you may communicate that to the forum manager, but no action should be taken by the forum manager or E-Democracy.Org to intervene in private disputes among individuals. If you feel you have privately received an illegal threat via e-mail you should contact the appropriate legal authorities. E-Democracy.Org and its chapters are not responsible for any private behavior. However, if it is determined that a pattern of abusive behavior is having a chilling effect on others' participation in the public forum, the forum manager may issue a warning and/or removal upon advising the local chapter steering committee.

6. Private Stays Private - Forwarding private messages to the online forum is not allowed without the express permission of the original author. This includes private replies to public posts and other private or personal communication including e-mail communication with public officials who may or may not be forum members. Public officials and forum managers have equal participation rights and responsibilities in our forums - everyone is a citizen first.

7. Avoid False Rumors, You Are Liable - Rumors of a personal nature are not allowed. Your posts must be accurate based on your full knowledge and never intentionally false. Unverified "grapevine" information of a public nature must be within a forum's issue-based scope to be appropriate. If in doubt about the appropriateness of a given topic, check privately with the forum manager before posting. Otherwise, the forum manager might take disciplinary action if your post is deemed to be off topic. Furthermore, via the forum itself, you must correct your previous expressions of fact or known information that you find later to be false or substantially incorrect. Exceptions include your assertions already publicly corrected or clarified by others in forum discussions. Corrections must be made within

any daily posting limit or via the forum manager if urgent. You and you alone are liable for the content of your own messages. E-Democracy.Org is not responsible or liable for the content posted to any technically un-moderated forum or moderated announcement service.

8. Right to Post and Reply - E-Democracy.Org through its right of free assembly and expression has further established equal rights among all registered forum members to participate. You may only lose those E-Democracy.Org established rights based on your actions, particularly rule violations. Only those who are registered forum members may post directly. Any person or organisation that is publicly mentioned in a forum post has a right to reply, unless that person has been suspended for rule violations. In order to post a reply, the individual (or an individual representing the organisation) must become a registered member of the forum.

9. Items Not Allowed in Forums, Exceptions - Commercial advertising, virus warnings from members and chain letters are prohibited from all forums. In e-mail based forums, posts must be plain text with no file attachments. Comments or complaints about forum management or complaints about member rule violations must not be posted to the main forum. Instead, direct such messages privately to the forum manager. Discussion of these rules or forum management may be taken public via our Participant Assembly in our Townhall: http://E-Democracy.Org /townhall

Public event promotions and links to commercial, media, or nonprofit online content related to the scope of the forum are appropriate. Participant signatures providing links to the work or projects of an individual are acceptable, but the display of specific products for sale are not allowed. E-Democracy.Org and its committees and chapters may acknowledge sponsors, donors, and their fundraising events in messages or on the web site.

10. Public Content and Use - By posting an original message, the message author agrees to allow E-Democracy.Org to distribute the message via the Internet and to include it in a publicly accessible online archive in perpetuity. While original message authors retain their personal copyright, they grant others the right to publicly quote portions of their message in any medium. Furthermore, the full text of messages may be forwarded via e-mail to others, as long as the author's name and the forum's name and web address is cited or linked. A discussion forum posting may only be removed from the public archives under a court order or under a case-by-case decision made by a chapter or the board.

With copyrighted material such as newspaper articles, you may post quotations from articles or web sites with the source URL. Fair use of excerpts (not the full text) is encouraged, as well as the distribution of extended text from government produced content.

Warnings and Suspension from E-Democracy.Org Forums

In our citizen-based forums, participants themselves keep the forums relevant and on track. There is no government, political group, corporation, or single individual controlling our self-governance system.

You may lose your right to participate based on your behavior in a forum. You may also regain your rights.

We know from at least a decade of experience, that volunteer-based forum facilitation and management is essential. We make difficult decisions and rein in rule violators in order to protect the public mission of our forums and E-Democracy.Org 's nonprofit obligations. We encourage those with different ideas about how online discussions should be structured and managed to start and announce such forums via our networks. We are just one voluntary model.

If at any point you feel these rules as written or historically applied do not serve the stated mission or goals of E-Democracy.Org, you have the right to petition the board for specific changes.

Warnings

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1. Manager Warnings - Official warnings are sent to the infringing member when a forum manager determines that a rule has been broken. The forum manager may at their discretion send informal advisories to encourage rule compliance. They may also at their discretion issue and record official warnings. The forum manager is not required to monitor every post.

2. Member Complaints - Forum members may send informal complaints privately to the potentially infringing participants to encourage citizen-to-citizen accountability. Any forum member may also file an official complaint about a specific post directly with the forum manager. They may not post their complaint publicly to the forum - this fundamentally distracts a forum from its purpose. The forum manager will respond to complaints in a uniform fashion and maintain records of all official warnings given.

3. Warnings Active - Official warnings last for one year. They must be recorded by the forum manager and kept in case of an appeal.

4. Special Moderation - A forum manager may moderate the posts of specific members upon notification to that member for up to two months while dealing with rule compliance issues. This may be renewed upon notification.

5. Managers as Citizens - forum managers retain the right to participate in the forum under same rules as other participants. They may express their opinions but may not allow their political views to influence specific forum management decisions. Complaints about potential rule violations by forum managers must be sent directly to the local E-Democracy chapter or the E-Democracy.Org Board of Directors.

Note: If forum management responsibilities are split among a team, a member of that team shall be designated to issue warnings and receive complaints on a regular or clearly identified rotating basis.

Suspension

6. Suspension Process - The warning process starts with probation and results in removal periods that grow in length based on repeat offenses. Warnings are specific to each forum. Due to variations in forum purposes and management styles, similar conduct may not result in the same sanction. The initial warning process and suspension level is private in order to avoid public member embarrassment - a penalty greater than that deserved.

While under suspension, a member may neither post nor ask others to forward their comments to the forum. While they may read the postings from the web, they may not forward or comment on those posts in other E-Democracy.Org forums on which they maintain full posting rights.

A. First Warning - The first official warning is recorded. The member is not suspended. Each warning expires after one full year. The member is considered to be on probation.

B. Second Warning - The second official warning results in immediate suspension from that specific forum for two weeks. Another two week suspension may be granted should the initial first warning expire before the third rule violation.

The first two warnings may not be appealed at this time. They may only be appealed on their merits if a third warning is given within one year of the first warning.

C. Third Warning - A third warning within a year of the first two warnings results in an immediate suspension for six months from the specific forum.

Notification of the suspension of this member must be sent to the local E-Democracy chapter and the E-Democracy.Org Board. After any member appeals are heard, at that member's request, the forum manager will post a basic notice to the public forum that that member has been suspended for six months. The forum manager shall remind forum participants that public discussion of suspensions violate the rules and shall offer a link to

the appropriate web forum that allows discussion of E-Democracy rules and administration: http://E-Democracy.Org /townhall

Upon returning, the member may receive a fourth warning if the first warning is still active or within two months, whichever is longer. Another third warning suspension will be granted after two months assuming that only the first active warning has expired.

D. Fourth Warning - A fourth official warning results in full removal from all E-Democracy.Org forums for five years. After any appeals are processed, an announcement about the removal of this member will be publicly posted to the forums to which that member belongs and sent to all E-Democracy chapters and the Board. The removed member has the option to provide an up to 300-word public statement that will be linked in the rules section of the E-Democracy web site. This will be linked to an optional 300-word statement from the forum manager about the causes for removal.

7. False Identity Process and Removal - If it is determined with careful consideration by the forum manager or E-Democracy.Org that a participant's actual identity is in question, E-Democracy.Org will immediately suspend posting for that person on all forums until such time that a one-page letter including a photocopy of a government issued ID with the full address and notarized signature (on the same page) is delivered to E-Democracy.Org. If no proof of identity is provided within two weeks, the e-mail address(es)/members accounts shall be deleted and banned from all E-Democracy.Org forums.

Any identified individual found to have violated this rule will be suspended from all participation in E-Democracy.Org forums and activities for five years. This includes any and all e-mail accounts associated with that person whether real or falsified. If it appears that fraud, forgery, identity theft, or computer crime laws have been violated, E-Democracy.Org will notify the appropriate legal authorities in the political jurisdiction most closely associated with the forum.

The only exception to this rule is the case-by-case prior approval by the forum manager and E-Democracy chapter or E-Democracy Board for the use of an alias by someone under official court protection or participation by individuals in countries where political expression is illegal and the serious threat of oppression or retribution exists. As an exception to this section, the charters for special time-limited, web-based online events on sensitive topics may be designed to allow anonymous participation with chapter or board approval only.

8. Appeals and Due Process - Any third or fourth warning may be appealed under our due process procedure to the local E-Democracy chapter or the E-Democracy.Org Board should a local forum management steering committee not exist. At that time, the validity of the first or second warning may also be reviewed and the total number of warnings reduced if any of the forum manager warnings are overturned. A forum member's suspension shall remain in effect during the review process. The review process may last no more than three weeks from confirmation that the appeal was received.

9. Technical Removal - Technical maintenance, full e-mail inboxes, or excessive bounced messages may cause a member to be temporarily or technically removed from the forum or result in a delayed distribution of their posts. In these cases, the member may rejoin the forum at any time.

10. Mission Responsibilities - It is the responsibility of the E-Democracy Board to develop and protect each forum as an organisational initiative within the non-profit mission of E-Democracy.Org. The E-Democracy Board reserves the right to remove any participant upon careful consideration and stipulate the terms and duration of that removal. Notices on such removals will be linked from the rules section the E-Democracy.Org website.

Forum Manager Responsibilities

These notes will form a new governance document applied to forum managers and chapter steering committees in the future. They are in effect now.

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1. Forum managers may only moderate discussion posts over a standard size/length, posts sent to multiple addresses or forums, posts with attachments, posts from new members to make sure they are not spammers upon the notification of those being moderated, or a temporary forum-wide moderation for up to 24 hours applied to all members as required on an extremely limited basis.

2. The forum manager may moderate, rename, clean headers, and/or ignore non-member messages.

3. Special time-limited online events, chats, and announcement services may be moderated on a prior and post review basis if clearly described in that service's charter.

4. The forum manager is selected and accountable to the chapter steering committee or the E-Democracy.Org Board if a chapter does not yet exist. A forum manager may be removed and the chapter or board shall consider and respond to specific complaints from forum participants about forum management. Suggestions on future "vote of confidence" or petition mechanisms to ensure legitimacy of the online public space are of interest to the board.

Adopted 12 FEB 1996, Revised 1 APR 1997, Major Revision 28 JUL 1999, Extensive Updating Approved 17 DEC 2004

Recent Rules Process Notes:

False identity process clarified, penalty added 30 AUG 2003, Rules streamlined, guidance moved to another document, removal process updated 14 APR 2004, Not yet adopted - Interim for the Chicago Issues Forum. Released for public comment, June 16 - July 1, 2004. All public comments reviewed and edits made. Version for Board approval and any final public comments, 10 DEC 2004. Proposals were open for public comment. Drafts 3.3 and 2.0 are available.

Where did these rules come from?

These rules are based on a decade of direct experience with volunteer-based facilitation of citizen-to-citizen online political discussion.

Imagine designing the rules of debate in the first parliament. These are our basic rules for the online citizen assembly of the 21st century. They can always be improved, but they provide a solid foundation.

Specific sources (links available from http://E-Democracy.Org /rules):

- Former Minnesota Politics Discuss Rules (primary source evolving since 1994)
- Former Minneapolis Issues Forum Rules
- Winona Online Democracy Rules
- E-Democracy Rules Task Force Discussion from 2003
- Public comments on proposed rules in 2004.
- E-Democracy's updated Draft Mission and Core Beliefs

Further research is available on our forum experiences – http://E-Democracy.Org /research.
In general, our rules are designed to strike the balance between freedom and responsibility.

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Appendix G: E-Democracy Member Survey Highlights

These are "baseline" numbers from our 2002 survey of participants on our local forums in Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Winona, as well as our original statewide MN-Politics discussion forum. Jakob Jensen surveyed a representative sample of forum members. Approximately 250 people responded to the survey, including a majority who are infrequent posters and readers (lurkers). Survey results mentioned in the main text of the guide are not repeated below.

For how long have the participants been active?

	%
Since 1994	4
Between 5 and 7 years	9
Between 3 and 4 years	21
Between 1 and 2 years	37
Less than a year	30

How did they first become aware of Minnesota E-Democracy?

	%
Via links on the Internet	18
Through an e-mail from a friend or family member	13
Through an e-mail from a political or professional contact	22
Through media coverage	8
Through word of mouth (off-line)	29
At a public meeting or event	2
Through print flyers or similar materials	0.4
Other	8.5

How often do participants (read) use Minnesota E-Democracy?
How often do they post to the forums?

	Participate (Read) %	Post %
Everyday	31	1
Most days	41	3
Most weeks	13	11
Every month	4.5	19
Rarely	6	47.5
Never	3	19

What activities have the participants engaged in?

	%
Started new discussions	42
Contributed to discussions	63
Requested information	32
Contributed information	48
Forwarded messages from other forums	49
Encouraged other to join the forum(s)	42
Engaged in private exchanges with other members	50
Read a post which caused me to contact an elected official	43
Read a post which caused me to attend a public meeting, event or rally	50
Read discussions without posting	81

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Consider your experience with the activities of E-Democracy. Which of the following purposes do you think it serves best? (one to three answers)

Discussion among citizens	58
Giving a voice to alternative perspectives	45.5
Discussion among citizens and politicians	45
Networking with other politically active people	41
Searching for information about politics or community issues	26
Putting issues on the political agenda	23
Giving a voice to diverse or less represented groups in society	19
Linking communities and neighbourhoods together	15
Affecting media coverage	9.5
Organizing grassroots activities	7
Contacting politicians	3

Considering the overall content in the forum(s) compared to viewpoints expressed in other media (TV, radio, newspapers etc.) Is it:

More balanced	31
Similar	25
Less balanced	43

Have you ever received *private responses* (those not shared publicly with other participants) to any of your postings?

Response from other participants

	%
Citizens	63
Government official	26
Elected official	32
Journalist	28

Character of *private* (offline or off-list) responses from other participants.

Kind of response

	%
Information offered	34
Supporting opinion	52
Differing opinion	34
Abusive comments	15

(The number of abusive private posts is lower than we expected, noting that this number can indicate only one or a few incidents over many years of participation. Private behaviour enabled by the forum is not something you can directly regulate, but it is important to monitor and intervene if the forum's missions or the safety of an individual is at risk.)

E-Democracy's effect on the participants' political behaviour.

	%
It has had some impact on my political opinions	57
It has influenced my vote in specific elections	19
It has changed one or more of my political opinions	15
It has changed how I normally vote	2
It has had no impact at all	29

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To what extent do you think the discussions affect the following areas?

Influencing political decisionmakers
25 percent moderate to large, 52 some impact, 22 said little or none

Setting the community agenda?
 21 percent moderate to large, 44 some, 27 little or none

Influencing topically related media coverage of community or political issues?
24 percent moderate to large, 45 some, 27 little or none

Affecting public life or your community relations with others?
26 percent moderate to large, 39 some, 32 little or none

While Jenson noted that a high percentage of people who participate in our forums are generally engaged in public life, **the more people participate in our forums the more engaged they become**. A majority indicated an increase in their knowledge about the rationale behind other people's opinions and a respect for those with differing opinions. Generating respect among citizens for those who hold differing views is a primary goal of E-Democracy.Org.

On a 5–point scale between -2 to +2, increases in these desired forum outcomes were universal:

Political interest	+ .83
Political knowledge	+1.29
Knowledge about rational behind other people's opinions	+1.15
Respect for those with differing opinions	+ .57
Civic involvement	+ .53

Further, on a scale of 0 to 4 (0 being no effect), participants fell the forums have a moderate effect on political decisionmakers (2.05), influencing media coverage (1.9), setting the community agenda (1.85), and affecting public life in general (1.88).

Demographic analysis indicates that forums members are better educated and wealthier than the average population. Minority participation was on par with statewide population percentages, but underrepresented in 2002 in the core city forums. Based on forum publicity in African-American newspapers after this survey and general posting trends, the diversity is improving with some immigrant and ethnic minority groups, but there is a need to seek funding or resources for a "new voices" outreach campaign, as well as follow-up surveys.

For more information on the survey, including a list of all questions asked, see:
http://www.e-democracy.org/research/surveyquestions.html

Additional Research – Content Analysis

An unpublished content analysis of randomly selected posts to the Minneapolis and Winona forums by a researcher with the reputable Pew Internet and American Life Project is also informative.

In short, 32 percent of seed posts, those starting new topics of discussion, cite or link to an outside source. Of all postings, 4.4 percent cite media, 2.5 percent cite government, and 3.3 percent cite another online source, 87 percent of all postings are opinion or information not citing a source. This demonstrates how a forum complements sources of local "one-way" content.

In terms of engagement, the posts analyzed:

	%
Takes conversation in new direction	23

Provides information requested	16
States/implies disagreement	15
States/implies full agreement	11
States/implies partial agreement	5
Other	15

Further, analysis found that in posts responding to others:

	%
Agrees for facts presented	7
Agrees, but for other reason	7
Disagrees – facts wrong	4
Disagress – facts interpreted wrong	1
Disagress – facts not relevant	3.5
Disagrees – reasoning wrong	6
Presents facts to contradict	3.5

In terms of community action, 4 percent ask forum members to take action in their posts, 2 percent asks government to act, and .6 percent report on civic actions taken (e.g. contacted someone, attended meeting, etc.).

For other research on E-Democracy.Org, see: **http://www.e-democracy.org/research**

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Appendix H: Alternative Methods and Forum Technology

As this Issues Forum Guidebook makes clear, technology is only a tool and not the foundation of a Local Issues Forum. While E-Democracy.Org builds its Local Issues Forums using enhanced e-mail list "GroupServer" technology, a local authority (government) may want to run a local forum using alternative web forum software. This can be done.

Using a web forum may significantly change the dynamic of the online space in terms of citizen use and expectations. A local authority, or any organisation for that matter, may also use any of the alternative open source e-mail list tools we list below. Key differences between e-mail lists and web forums must be overcome for a web forum to work as an issues forum. For a local authority with a web forum, the issues forum could become a special section within their forum using some of the special rules and facilitation techniques we've found essential to sustain citizen-to-citizen dialogue online.

Key differences to overcome:

1. **Location** - Push not pull - Daily/regular access to citizens who agree to participate is essential. It is location, location, location. Most citizens spend far more time in their e-mail inbox than anywhere else online.

With e-mail lists, the organiser only needs to convince the citizen to say "yes" once. Once subscribed, they can only leave by turning off e-mail delivery. With web forums, the citizen must decide to visit the web forum each time they are online. A forum host must integrate such visits into a citizen's regular web browsing behaviour - a substantial challenge.

The key technical feature a web forum platform must support and have turned on by default is basic e-mail notification of new posts and/or full text digests of new posts. A newer feature an acceptable web forum system should support is RSS headlines. Like many do with blog headlines, this allows people to the scan subject lines of new posts from their own "newsreaders." The forums are then only a click away from participation.

2. **Audience Dissipation** - E-mail lists can be like a fire hose - it is on or it is off. Normally giving citizens the ability to read only what interests them is considered valuable. Most online communities are focused on highly specialized interests, so web forum technology tends to reinforce a bias that it should be easy to avoid lesser interest topics.

Issues forums are designed with a different perspective. Citizens must become exposed to diverse local issues in the "common interest" not just their own special interests. Citizens need to see their pet cause in relation to or in competition with other ideas and priorities in the local community.

From a technical perspective, with threaded web forums (where you click to see each post following a tree of sorts) or linear forums (where each post on a topic is places one after another) with lots of topics, actual readership normally declines with each page requiring a click to read.

This has a political effect. The deeper you go into a forum, the motivation to post by experts or politically powerful individuals declines due to the perceived lack of audience. People understand that few may be reading a particular post and often look for the "action." From our experience, with e-mail lists, the active dissemination of posts tends to motivate greater responses from those who are normally too busy to go to a web forum. (However, with email you cannot measure what percentage of posts are read or deleted without opening. We do know from surveys that Internet users are more likely to access their e-mail each day than use the web.)

We feel web forums with a linear format are most appropriate for the Local Issues Forums concept and suggest that a special topic or forum section apply a version of our special rules.

3. **Access** - While more and more people have broadband or always-on Internet connections, quick and economical access to the content along with the ability to easily publish is key. Pressing reply to

an e-mail, whether you are a citizen or elected official, is the easiest way to publish online. With e-mail people can compose their message off-line before locking up their phone line. This can help citizens limit local telephone toll charges where they exist, therefore keeping the cost of participation to a minimum.

While it is easy to suggest that citizens should be able to post to a web forum via e-mail, most web forum tools require people to post via the web. We highly recommend that you choose a web forum tool (or adapt one) that sends the full text of posts or digests of posts to those who dial-up, download, and disconnect. If your web forum tool has a feature that allows e-mail posting, we encourage you to use that feature.

4. **Real Names, Rules, and Facilitation** - The use of aliases in web forums are part of the Internet culture. People choose cute or quirky logins (e.g. twinkletoes) that are not particularly meaningful to a local councillor, journalist, or other active citizens. Those with power and influence tend to value statements from people willing to sign their own names. Names also provide average citizens context, and with our local geographic approach protecting one's offline and online reputation promotes more civil discourse.

While a local authority could require real names on their whole web forum system (a system they might use for online consultations, as well), we understand that this may be difficult and with some sensitive topics, undesirable. E-Democracy.Org chooses to use real names as an option. We oppose any government-mandated requirement for the use of real names online with political speech. We also acknowledge that the Local Issues Forum model was born in a "safe" democracy where fear of retribution or sanction for ones public expressions from government or others is minimal. However, we do not feel the fear of being ostracised or looked down upon by one's peers for expressing unpopular political views justifies the anonymous posting in an official E-Democracy issues forum. Those significantly concerned about being held accountable for their public expressions, should express their views in the multitude of online forums with no or different rules.

To adapt the Local Issues Forum model to a web forum, a section of the web forum would need additional rules and some level of facilitation. We recommend that you simply require in this section of the web forum, that everyone sign their real name to posts and limit the number or daily posts by one person to two or three per day. Facilitation is key and could come from a citizen volunteer or a civil servant with a special and understood role. We support governments that provide a real names space along side online spaces that support pseudo-anonymity or anonymous speech.

5. **Citizen-to-Citizen** - The biggest challenge for government-hosted open web forums are the citizen posts that say, "where is the government" or "who is reading our posts." We've seen this "build it they will come and it will run on its own" scenario a number of times. Government "technically" established a web forum but did not prepare for human aspects of the effort. A government forum host must establish realistic expectations among citizen participants.

Fujisawa, Japan uses an innovative web forum approach. Their forum topic index uses two columns. The first column offers government initiated topics. The other column contains citizen-determined topics. The government is clear from the start - these are topics on which they need input. Then, with other topics, they note that citizens may choose what to discuss and the government will only participate when they have the time or interest.

For a Local Issues Forum to succeed it must be viewed by the citizens as something that they create and are ultimately responsible for in terms of its value to the community. This is true of a government-hosted Issues Forum or one that is citizen-based. Citizens must not be placed in a client or service position where the government or host organisation is viewed as having a special obligation to post. The need or motivation to post by public leaders and others should be generated based on political and community value, as well as understanding that participation in the forum "matters" in what they perceive as the "real world." This is what makes an issues forum fundamentally different from a government online consultation where the government's policy or proposal is on the stage and the success of the online event is squarely on the shoulders of the organisers.

6. **Governance** - With E-Democracy's local self-governance model, the local forum manager is accountable to a local steering group of citizens. We feel it is essential to create a political buffer between issues forum administration and top decisionmakers in government. With technical control of a forum comes the ability to remove or alter posts. This power must be exercised based on agreed policies and practices known to the citizen participants or trust will be undermined when or if discussion altered for any legitimate or illegitimate reason. See our *Cost and Benefit* appendix in this guidebook for an extended discussion.

7. **Open Source Forum Tools** - Our project mandate is to list interactive tools that may be installed at no charge on an open source basis by local authorities. Free, but proprietary packages are not listed. Sometimes you get what you pay for and we encourage every organisation to carefully evaluate non-proprietary and proprietary forum and e-mail list packages based on the cost to administer and adapt, not just install.

Open Source Web Forum Tools

> 1. **PHPBB** - Mysql/PHP-based - We are monitoring the beta Mail to Forum add-on.
> http://www.phpbb.com
> http://www.mail2forum.com
>
> 2. **MVNForum** - Java-based
> http://www.mvnforum.com/mvnforumweb
>
> 3. **Snitz Forums** - Microsoft ASP-based
> http://forum.snitz.com

Again, with web forum tools, we recommend that a special topic or space within the forum be declared the Local Issues Forum. You may govern the entire forum system with an issues forum-style rule set, but unless you deploy the forum in such a way that people are exposed or "teased" about issues they might not seek out, the forum system will not bring people together in the common interest. A system-wide technique might be to automatically generate e-mail digest of posts or topic links so people are exposed to activity across the forum.

Open Source E-mail List Tools with Web Archives

> 1. **Mailman** - Used widely, poor web archive usability. Used previously by E-Democracy.Org.
> http://www.list.org
>
> 2. **Sympa** - Slightly more web-integrated.
> http://www.sympa.org

If you are a citizen group with few resources and an interest in creating your own independent forum, you can check out advertising-based "free" forums like YahooGroups, Google Groups, and MSN Groups.

Combined Tools

> 1. **GroupServer** is now being released as an open source package under the GPL framework. It uses Zope and advanced XML standards. In order to provide ease of use for users, this sophisticated software is designed for expert level installation. A technical discussion of further e-mail/web forum issues is on our eWeb page.
> http://www.groupserver.org
> http://www.e-democracy.org/groupserver
> http://www.e-democracy.org/center/eweb.html

Further Information

A comprehensive review of online conferencing tools is available from E-Democracy.Org Board Member David Woolley: http://www.thinkofit.com/webconf

Appendix I: Benefits and Costs Discussion

The main individual stakeholders that naturally do a cost-benefit analysis about their participation in a Local Issues Forum are citizens (active and "average"), local councillors, journalists, and civil servants.

From an organisational-hosting perspective, the local authority, citizen organisers, and voluntary associations need to take the benefits and costs of establishing an issues forum into account.

Individual Benefits and Costs

Issues forums represent the collective community conversation capacity generated by hundreds of individual choices to participate. The more readers or "lurkers" the larger the benefit received to all participants.

Active citizens are looking for an audience who will listen to their views. Local councillors and "average citizens" are looking for something highly relevant to their local community and do not want off-topic national or abstract political philosophy discussions to waste their time. Civil servants want to keep in the loop on issues in the community and correct the information record efficiently.

Journalists and others find issues forums to be particularly valuable when the need to take the pulse of the community or discover emerging trends. The process of finding a citizen or councillor with something new or interesting worth quoting is often quite difficult and the usual or known experts tend to be tapped again and again by the local media. Bringing new and unique voices into the mass media coverage of local issues is one of the most important community benefits of a vibrant issues forum.

Ultimately, the entire design of the issues forum, from the use of real names to posting volume restrictions, is meant to increase the "signal" and "reduce" noise. If the forum takes too much time to follow among those who are genuinely interested in the content, the benefits are reduced. Time scarcity must be appreciated by issues forum organisers.

The Local Issues Forum model pays particular attention to ensuring benefits to readers, while with typical political web forums, newsgroups, and e-mail lists those who post the most typically dominate the oversight of a forum. Such typically alias-based or anonymous political discussion spaces do not work well if your goal is to maximize the audience size and provide value to diverse participants in a geographic community. Despite the diversity of posters fostered by our two-post-a -ay rules, there will be a core of "usual suspects" who post often. Efforts should be taken to encourage 20 percent to 35 percent of members to post at least once a month. Forum facilitation and encouragement is always required to bring out new voices or "signal" into any conversation environment be it in-person or online.

Issues Forums Versus Citizen E-mail to Government

Another citizen benefit relates directly to how they spend their time "having their say." From writing a letter to the editor, attending a meeting, creating a blog, sending an e-mail, or simply voting, citizens are looking to generate the most benefit from their participation. Finding the right mix of participation is unique to each citizen. We encourage citizens to reflect on the power of a private e-mail to an elected official versus public forms of engagement.

What is more effective for a citizen? Sending a private message to an elected official or writing a solid letter to the editor to the local newspaper? Our issues forums have often been referred to a 24-hours-a-day, letter-to-the-editor page.

As staff with former Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura told us, "E-mail is quiet. It doesn't cause the lights to flash on the switchboard nor does it frazzle the receptionist." We worked out an arrangement with the governor where replies to his e-mail included a note at the bottom encouraging citizens to "discuss issues important to them" with other citizens on E-Democracy's statewide political discussion forum. As Steven Clift, E-Democracy Board chair, noted to the governor's staff, "Wouldn't you rather have citizens e-mailing each other instead of e-mailing you all the time". While a Local Issues Forum will most likely not reduce the total volume of e-mail received by elected officials, the benefit of a 24x7, open and accessible place for the formation of public opinion is quite valuable for a community. Ideas don't require media interest to spread and citizens hold each other accountable for the views expressed. The give and take also builds greater public awareness of and respect for the complex and often competing demands on local authorities and decisionmakers.

Organisational Cost/Benefit

If your financial costs are extremely low and your model is sustainable, then the benefits of an open community conversation shine through. Compared to online consultations costs, where a topic for consideration is chosen (normally by government), issues forums are much less labor-intensive to run than a time-based, multi-week online consultation.

The main resource cost is the participatory approach to forming a local steering committee and the aggressive, often one-by-one participant recruitment process. These are upfront time costs that require dedication, persistence, and optimism. Once a forum is established the main central time costs are bourne by the forum manager. Special community outreach efforts, particularly to less enfranchised communities, will require resources of a fiscal or volunteer nature and will go well beyond the expected volunteer job of the forum manager. Occasional problems with out of line participants who, for example, may appeal a forum suspension to the steering committee also consume volunteer capacity. Providing due process and rights to participants costs more than claiming arbitrary power and control over what happens in a forum.

Local Authorities Involvement

At a minimum, we suggest that local authorities play a supporting, convening, or endorsing role in the creation of local independent, citizen-run issues forums in the UK. Ultimately the idea must be compelling, the benefits measurable, and costs low enough to effectively and quickly share this model with communities around the UK and beyond.

In the middle, local authorities could fund an issues forum start-up, basic technology costs, and assist with outreach into diverse communities. At this time, we caution against raising the ongoing costs of the model by professional forum facilitation. However, online events on special topics (online consultations organised from a citizen-based perspective perhaps) are highly labour-intensive and do require funding to produce. Online events and consultations complement issue forums significantly and can bring in more participants. In a community with active and linked government online consultations and an issues forum, the sum would be greater than the parts.

Maintaining reasonable citizen expectations in a forum is vital. Citizens must see themselves as the ultimate producers of value in the forum and not expect to be served as customers or taxpayers. Any level of funding will require a counter message that makes it clear that an issues forum is about citizens having their say and not something on the shoulders of government. Public institutions, like any organisation in the community, participate because the benefits are perceived and posting is strategic and not an obligation.

Through 2005 E-Democracy.Org has agreed to host any Local Issues Forum in the UK organised by citizens as official E-Democracy efforts or by local authorities either as legally E-Democracy.Org-owned forums or as efforts owned and operated by the local authorities themselves. Under the local authority ownership model, all liability and ultimate forum control responsibilities shifts to the authority.

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Local Authorities as Hosts

At a maximum, a local authority could fully organise and technically run an issues forum. Local authorities may also adapt elements of our model for their own needs. There is no one right way, perhaps five good paths to choose from and 95 wrong ways to avoid.

The most important policy questions for government-run forums relate to who sanctions members for rule violations, whose public voice facilitates the discussions (civil servant, councillor, outside consultant, or a citizen volunteer), what is the procedure for reviewing and removing libelous posts, and ultimately what powers of control does the local authority reserve up front. These are all challenging questions similar to government deciding to run a community television station - who has ultimate editorial control, ownership of the content (we don't claim copyright on participant posts on E-Democracy.Org, for example), etc.

We recommend that issues forum-management have a citizen advisory committee with a clear leadership and accountability role. There should be a buffer between issues forum administration and the political and management structures in the authority. The cost of being accused of content censorship based on political sensitivity is too great to allow that possibility to procedurally exist. Like public access cable television in the United States, appointing an advisory committee that can take the heat "for what went wrong" or inappropriate content every few years is politically important. The goal is to maintain freedom an online public space provides to a community despite suffering a single but extremely negative incident.

For independent issues forum, not affiliated with E-Democracy.Org, the local authority could appoint or solicit members for an official advisory committee. This committee should have a clear mandate and responsibilities. They could recruit and hold accountable the forum manager. The forum manager can be a volunteer from the community with the right skills and time capacity, a civil servant with the right touch, or someone on a small contract (something E-Democracy does not do in order to keep costs down and keep participant expectations in proper perspective - we are content producers and participative consumers not passive clients).

Issues Forum Compared to Online Consultations

We believe that citizen-focused issues forums and government-organised online consultations are the perfect complements. Consultations generate media attention and bring in new people for a short time frame while issues forums support ongoing dialogue and build the skills of e-citizenship.

Most online consultations fail based on poor recruitment and limited citizen participation. Building a dynamic issues forum in your community will make it that much easier to spread the word about consultations and bring in active participants. When a successful consultation is over, through links and e-mails, governments can say, "Now that our special event is over, you can continue your online participation in our Local Issues Forum."

In summary issues forums are the "egg" of local e-democracy and online consultations are the "chicken." You can't have a chicken without an egg.

There is no agreed estimate on the cost to host an effective online consultation, but our sense is that the resources required to host one online consultation is similar to the resources required to launch a new issues forum that will perpetuate itself and generate significantly more citizen dialogue in its first two months than a typical online consultation. E-Democracy.Org estimates that a new forum, assuming basic citizen interest in the idea, a 20,000 person population base, and a volunteer forum manager, can be launched for less than 10,000 GBP. That includes an interim investigation of community interest before using the full budget. Ongoing costs could range between 1,000 and 5,000 GBP a year for a forum established as part of E-Democracy.Org using our low cost model.

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Appendix J: About E-Democracy.Org

What is E-Democracy.Org

E-Democracy.Org is unique. We are a nonpartisan citizen based organisation building a platform for democracy in the information age, from the citizen's perspective.

We are creating a new kind of online public space, a virtual town square where citizens, the media, government staff, and elected officials meet to share information and discuss the important issues of the day.

We seek to challenge existing assumptions about civic participation and create new opportunities for engagement that are fundamentally "of the information age" and not simply a migration of "politics as usual" to the Internet. We believe that current use of the Internet by democratic institutions, including the media, governments, and political parties, though well-intentioned, is accelerating our current path - democratic decline.

We believe that citizen intervention is required to save democracy from the unintended negative consequences of the information age. By articulating our vision and beliefs we hope that our approach engages others and inspires them to join our democratic mission for the 21st century.

E-Democracy.Org Mission Statement

>*Improving citizen participation in democracies and communities through the power of information and communication technologies and strategies.*

Goals

Through collaborative efforts led by active citizens from across the political spectrum, our goals are to:

>*Strengthen, expand, and diversify citizen engagement through effective and meaningful online discussions and two-way information exchange on public issues.*

Increase the use and relevancy of democratic information resources that inform citizens about elections, governance, the media and public affairs, and help us meet public challenges.

Build and sustain the unique citizen-based "E-Democracy.Org" model, so active citizens anywhere can join us and work to improve the outcomes of citizen participation in governance and public life in their communities and nations.

Core Beliefs

In order to build and exercise public trust, E-Democracy.Org 's mission and goals are supported by the following public beliefs:

1. Using the Internet with Democratic Intent Can be Highly Effective - Participation in democracy and public life is substantially improved by strategic use of the Internet's tremendous capacity to improve communication among community members. When done well, the application of Internet technologies can help busy citizens build and sustain their involvement on their own time, from anywhere. Traditional forms of democratic participation are hindered by exclusionary barriers of time and place.

2. Led by Active Citizens, for All Citizens through E-Democracy.Org - Active citizens with diverse political views and backgrounds can work together to fundamentally improve their local communities, regions, nations, and world. Excessive partisanship and social divisions highlighted in our daily media

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and online experiences will not stop diverse and committed citizens from working together to build efforts that use the Internet in the common interest.

3. Useful Public Information and Civic Education is Essential - Based on where they live and vote, citizens need access to public policy, political, election, government, media and civil society information resources that are presented in a balanced and easy to use manner. Citizens around the world need quick navigation paths to high quality and diverse information sources that help them become more educated, informed and interactive with their fellow citizens and democratic institutions.

4. Dynamic Online Discussions of Public Issues Are Required - Many-to-many communication is what the Internet offers to democracy that is fundamentally unique and powerful. One-way political information broadcast models dominate most institutional and many individual-led uses of the Internet. To counter this one-way approach, issue-based online conversations are required to effectively enhance diverse citizen participation.

5. With Rights and Responsibilities for All Participants - Today citizens can and do choose media sources which reinforce their existing views. This has replaced in-person and previous mass media experiences that brought people with diverse perspectives together.

We believe all participants must be able to participate equally as citizens, including political leaders and journalists, with no group of participants having special status or obligations.

6. Future of E-Democracy.Org Will Be Built from the Local Level up to National and Global Networks - Active citizens will work together when and where they can experience and measure the results of their involvement. The most cost effective investment of time and resources comes from community-based efforts that build from local level on up.

7. The Default Is Democratic Decline, Help Us Reverse It - Bad news – early on, many people felt that the Internet was inherently democratic and that good outcomes would come naturally without much effort. Many hoped that an Internet-fostered democratic wave would sweep the world. Since our launch in 1994, E-Democracy.Org has never made that claim. Now the opposite is true. Many are discounting the Internet's potential based in large part on the one-way online activities of existing political interests and other's past hype.

E-Democracy.Org puts the citizen first. We add the democratic intent required to transform citizen engagement in the information age. Our 10 years of experience of what works and what doesn't is ready to be shared and extended to any group of citizens ready to make a difference. To not act, in your local community, state/province, or nation is to accept existing Internet-accelerated democratic decline. We have decided to be citizens. We will work to ensure that the will of the people can be expressed and accommodated in the information age. Join us.

Background and History of E-Democracy.org

E-Democracy.Org was established in 1994 by a group of community activists who saw the potential of the Internet as a tool to empower citizens with information. It began as a statewide effort in Minnesota that focused on creating a nonpartisan election-orientated web site. Volunteers collected and posted a variety of position papers, speeches, and campaign materials for U.S. Senate and Minnesota Gubernatorial races.

During that first year, E-Democracy.Org experimented with what were possibly the first ever online candidate debates (U.S. Senate and Minnesota Governor) and formed the "Bit Bucket Brigade"-- a group of computer volunteers who manually posted election results to the Internet on election night.

After the election, an ongoing statewide "Issues Forum" emerged. Using mailing list technology, E-Democracy.Org began to create a unique online political discussion forum, governed by rules and requiring a certain level of civility on the part of participants. A few years later, David Brauer launched our first Local Issues Forum, the Minneapolis Issues List. It was then that we discovered the real potential of a "Local Issues Forum."

While the Internet has the unique ability to bring people together over vast distances, it also has a powerful ability to facilitate the flow of information and ideas within a local community. Even more important, we found that at a local level, our discussions were much more likely to actually have a direct impact on public policy. Since then, our model for "Local Issues Forums" has been expanded to communities such as St. Paul, Minnesota; Winona, Minnesota; and Chicago, Illinois.

The year 2005 holds great promise for E-Democracy.Org as we pilot our model for online citizen engagement in several communities in the UK. In addition, we are working with GroupSense, based in Christchurch, New Zealand to modify their GroupServer technology to meet the specific needs of an E-Democracy.Org Local Issues Forum. For the first time, E-Democracy.Org will be able to offer a complete package of technology and training to communities interested in launching their own Local Issues Forum.

We welcome your interest in our journey and hope our experiences will inform and encourage you to experiment and enlarge the growing field of e-democracy.

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