



# **Countywide Community Forums Public Engagement Program Evaluation**

**Chantal Stevens  
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**May 30, 2013  
Report No. 2013-03**

## **Executive Summary**

Over its five-year operation, the Countywide Community Forums program engaged an increasingly diverse public who valued its ease of access and educational merit. Overall attendance topped 4,500 participants. This evaluation showed that the program met most criteria for quality public engagement. Due to the absence of data on how policy-makers used the results, and the difficulty of sustaining the current program structure, this evaluation cannot ascertain the program's effectiveness. However, the evaluation provides useful lessons learned as the county pursues its public engagement goals.



# King County

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## MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** May 30, 2013

**TO:** Metropolitan King County Councilmembers

**FROM:** *CB*  
Cheryle A. Broom, County Auditor

**SUBJECT:** Countywide Community Forums Public Engagement Program Evaluation

Attached for your review is the Countywide Community Forums (CCF) Public Engagement Program Evaluation. The primary objective of the study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Countywide Community Forums at meeting its mandates and other expectations for a public engagement program.

CCF is a unique public engagement program that is no longer funded or operational. However, King County continues to pursue its public engagement strategic goal. This includes advancing equity and social justice. In that context, lessons learned from this pilot program include build upon outreach approaches that allow for a broad representation of King County's diversity, provide the public sufficient information to form an opinion, and incorporate a feedback mechanism between the public and public officials so the public knows how its input is used.

Chantal Stevens, Principal Performance Management Analyst, conducted this study under the supervision of Cheryle Broom, County Auditor. Please contact Chantal at 206-477-1040 or Cheryle at 206-477-1038 if you have any questions about this evaluation.



## Public Engagement Program Evaluation

## Report Highlights

May 30, 2013

Report No. 2013-03

### Purpose

This review evaluates the effectiveness of the structure, process and ability to meet expected outcomes of the Countywide Community Forums (CCF) as established by Ordinance 15896 and implemented as a new public engagement program between 2007 and 2011. Although CCF's operations were discontinued at the end of 2011, the CCF experience offers valuable lessons on developing and maintaining a public engagement program within King County.

### Key Findings

We evaluated the Countywide Community Forums program from the standpoint of meeting the intent of its mandates, providing value to the participants and King County, and addressing the expectations of public engagement programs as outlined in the research. The following findings emerged from the evaluation:

- While the ordinance was useful in initiating the program, laying out the vision and ensuring some sustainability for the program, some specific requirements limited flexibility in its implementation.
- Reaching out to participants and keeping them involved was a challenge that required a host of innovative strategies. However, those who participated were generally satisfied with the ease of access to the forums and the quality of the experience, as well as the length, content and even-handedness of the videos and surveys.
- The small forum format is recognized as highly conducive to good deliberation and information gathering but was difficult to organize and sustain. Larger forums and on-line participation allowed the forums to reach wider and larger audiences.
- The reports were well received by policy-makers and other county stakeholders, although to a limited audience. Time pressures constrained the depth of the analysis and customization of their content.
- While the existence of a steering committee was viewed as useful, the composition as mandated by the ordinance was challenging.
- The program was expensive to support on a per-survey basis, but external funding was sufficient for three years and allowed for the proper functioning of the program. However, the funding's origin, from a single

source, gave the appearance of influence over the program's operation and results.

- We cannot say with certainty that the program was effective. There are several aspects that were identified as working well, such as providing the public an opportunity to participate in learning more about King County. Many participants came from groups or communities that normally do not have that opportunity. Other results are more difficult to demonstrate, such as the forums impact on public policy-making.
- There is much that the program sponsors, county officials, volunteers and other stakeholders can highlight to illustrate value of their investment in this unique public engagement program.

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## **What We Recommend**

At this time, CCF is no longer funded or operational. However, King County continues to pursue its public engagement strategic goal. This includes advancing equity and social justice. In that context, we offer the following observations or ideas. Consideration of these observations is dependent on the purpose and breadth of the public engagement effort.

- Establish the framework and intent for a public engagement approach in legislation; an implementation plan could be subsequently submitted for review
- Build upon the outreach approaches that allow for a broad representation of King County's diversity
- Keep an advisory committee small and representative
- Incorporate a feedback mechanism between the public and public officials
- Keep communication materials focused, objective, interesting and brief
- Select timely topics and strive for balanced and unbiased portrayal of issues
- Provide the public sufficient information to form an opinion
- Incorporate the engagement process into the county's decision-making deliberations
- Provide online and in-person participation opportunities, weighing the pros and cons of options
- Provide training and facilitation to participants

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# I. Introduction

## Section Summary

After a brief description of the Countywide Community Forums program process, this section outlines the program’s history as a citizen-sponsored initiative with eight rounds of forums between 2007 and 2011. To provide context, we offer an overview of public engagement in King County.

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## Program Description

The foundation of the Countywide Community Forums (CCF) program is a network of several thousand registered King County residents, called citizen councilors, who sign up through a website, by calling a number, or by completing a form. This network is kept informed of upcoming forum rounds and receives ancillary information throughout the year.

A round of CCF is the process of choosing a topic, developing the topic materials, organizing forums, compiling the survey responses and producing a report. It starts with a meeting of the Advisory Steering Committee, which can include all county councilmembers, the mayors of all the cities within the county, tribal leaders, university presidents and others, as outlined in the enabling legislation (King County Ordinance 15896, thereafter referred to as the “ordinance”). The committee issues a recommendation and the county auditor selects a topic that is relevant and timely, based on this recommendation. The CCF coordinators work with the King County CCF program oversight manager in the auditor’s office (thereafter referred to as the “program manager”) to develop the materials for the forums. All materials are subject to approval by the county auditor and go through a diligent process of review and revision to assure accuracy and to strike a balance between divergent perspectives of the different parties. Materials usually consist of a one- to four-page background information paper, a video and a survey.

During an auditor-approved four- to six-week participation window, all registered councilors are invited to fill out the survey, called an Opinionnaire<sup>®</sup>. Originally, the surveys were completed only during forums held by fellow councilors in homes, libraries, or workplaces throughout King County. Ideally attended by 4-12 councilors, the forum starts with the viewing of a short introductory video that explains the process. Then, participants view a 15- to 30-minute video on the topic. In a process called “a day in the sun,” they introduce themselves and their views, uninterrupted for about five minutes. An un-moderated discussion follows during the next 30 to 60 minutes and, finally, participants complete the Opinionnaire<sup>®</sup>.

# I. Introduction

In recent rounds, councilors have been invited to participate online and larger forums have been organized by nonprofit organizations, gradually replacing the smaller, home-based forums. During Rounds 7 and 8, competitive grants were offered to nonprofit organizations, based on their success in bringing in participations.

Once completed, Opinionnaires<sup>®</sup> are mailed or transmitted electronically by participants to the auditor's office. The results are compiled into a report that is posted on the auditor's website that can then be shared with the County Council, the media, and councilors bringing the round to conclusion. That report may also be presented to the County Council and shared with other county stakeholders.

A round of forums lasts four to six months from the initial meeting of the Advisory Steering Committee to the release of the report to the public. Between 2007 and 2011, nine rounds of forums were held.<sup>1</sup> All round reports and materials are available on the auditor's office website.

## History

In September 7, 2007, the Metropolitan King County Council unanimously adopted Citizen Initiative 24 – the Easy Citizen Involvement Initiative – as Ordinance 15896. Richard (Dick) J. Spady, co-founder of Dick's Drive-In Restaurant, based the concept on the theories outlined in the 2002 book *The Leadership of Civilization Building* he co-authored with Richard S. Kirby. The initiative had gathered the 80,000 signatures necessary to place it on the election ballot.

In October 2007, King County Auditor Cheryle Broom appointed Dick Spady as volunteer Citizen Councilor Coordinator and his two sons, John and Jim, as his Deputy Coordinators.

An initial probation period, as prescribed by the ordinance, ended when the first 1,000 people signed up to participate as citizen councilors and when the first \$20,000 donation was received in December 2007.

In May 2008, Chantal Stevens joined the auditor's office to provide day-to-day management and oversight of the program from within King County. Until it was placed on hold for lack of funding in late 2011, CCF offered 9 rounds of forums to the residents of King County. The last round of forums attracted the largest attendance (1,440).

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 1 for a description of nine rounds.

# I. Introduction

## **Public Engagement in King County**

The County Council's adoption of the CCF program in 2007 was one of many efforts by King County to strengthen community engagement and improve the two-way exchange of information and ideas between policy-makers, department managers, and the public. Recent examples help set the context for this endeavor:

- In the 2008 Performance and Accountability Act, the county committed to engaging the public in the development of countywide priorities.
- In 2010, the King County Council chose Trust in Government as its first Council Priority with a goal of 'making King County government more transparent, accountable and accessible with a culture of service excellence and public engagement.'
- Also in 2010, the King County Equity and Social Justice Initiative facilitated events at various locations to raise awareness about the initiative and the issue of inequity and to promote a shared understanding around possible actions and activities. In 2012, the King County Council in its Work Plan for Equity and Social Justice committed in a motion to increase opportunities for the community to engage with Council.
- The King County Strategic Plan was adopted by the Council in 2010 and includes a Public Engagement goal to promote robust public engagement that informs, involves, and empowers people and communities, as well as the equity and social justice principle of Fair and Just. These goals were reached after engaging the public through surveys and public forums, including Countywide Community Forums. Two countywide community surveys were completed in 2009 and 2012.
- In 2011, the King County Executive published a Community Engagement Guide for employees and programs to promote effective engagement and customer service with all county communities. The guide provides examples and resources to implement both the Strategic Plan's Public Engagement goal and its Fair and Just principle that embodies the county's mandated commitment to Equity and Social Justice.
- The King County Council, as well as King County agencies and departments, also conduct regular public hearings as mandated under various county, state or federal legislation.

## 2. Process Evaluation

### Section Introduction

**The impact of a public engagement program on its participants is difficult to assess in the absence of a control group, because public engagement is inherently a complex and value-laden concept.** Our assessment was completed using the program organization approach proposed by Tina Nabatchi in *A Manager's Guide to Evaluating Citizen Participation*, published by the IBM Center for The Business of Government. The process evaluation looks at implementation and management of the program, and the outcome evaluation focuses on CCF's results. By examining how the components of the CCF program (mandate, staffing, resources, survey, video and forums) worked, this section assesses whether the program was, and can be, managed efficiently, whether it was valued by its various users, and, to a certain extent, whether it is logistically replicable.

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### Program Organization

#### **Legal mandate and standards**

The Citizen Councilor Network Ordinance (15896) provides background and context to the program, as well as explanations of the program's techniques and implementation steps. The ordinance specified highly detailed procedures that the program was required to follow, which created some operational challenges.

The 2010 evaluation conducted by the King County Auditor's Office (KCAO) reported that stakeholders felt the ordinance was in places restrictive, unclear or difficult to enforce. It set some strict rules in areas, such as the composition and role of the Advisory Steering Committee, where implementation would have benefited from more flexibility or nimbleness. The ordinance also limited the ability of the program to learn, adapt, and evolve. Because of its prescriptive nature, the ordinance did not allow for experimentation and focused at times on the details of implementation instead of on the end goal.

While CCF interviewees were generally satisfied by how the ordinance laid out the vision for the program, and how it generally insulated the program from being "co-opted," County interviewees commented that the ordinance was written in a very unusual way and suggested that the program would have been stronger if revisions had been made to the ordinance before adoption. Interviewees also noted that the program might have been more effective had the ordinance specified a role and a timeline for King County leadership to receive the CCF information and consider it.

## 2. Process Evaluation

### **Program staffing and responsibilities**

While the ordinance outlined specific roles and responsibilities for each party and contributed to occasional tension during implementation, overall, program staff brought a variety of skills to their roles and contributed to the success of the program.

Program staff consisted of three auditor-appointed coordinators and one KCAO program manager. Although some program implementation work started before she joined KCAO, the program manager remained throughout the course of the program. On the other hand, there were changes among the coordinators, who were originally Dick Spady and his sons, Jim and John Spady. After Dick Spady retired, the Spady family brought in several staff members as coordinators and deputy coordinators and in different supporting roles, such as communications and outreach. Six people served as coordinator and deputy coordinator over three years.

The coordinators, for the most part, had experience and backgrounds that included communications and outreach, civic engagement, and law. All the coordinators and CCF supporting staff were paid employees of Dick's Drive-In Restaurants (DDIR) and reported to DDIR management.

The program manager was an experienced public engagement and nonprofit management professional who also benefited from the knowledge pool of KCAO and the County. As a legislative branch employee of King County, she reports to the King County Auditor and follows County and KCAO policies.

Some of the roles and responsibilities of KCAO and the coordinators were broadly identified in the ordinance. They included a general list of responsibilities for the coordinators and KCAO. The design of the program with its distinct role of the coordinators as implementers and of KCAO as overseer created two separate organizational or reporting tracks that supported a certain level of accountability but also created an implementation challenge. As a result, working relationships between the two sides had to be established, recognized, and formalized as work progressed. Some roles became de facto assigned to an individual staff member based more on expertise and skills than on the requirements of the ordinance. KCAO, for example, took on the task of compiling the data and producing the initial report. Interviews revealed that positions evolved to provide critical balance. A natural tension was present during the difficult

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process of balancing the desire of the coordinators for editorial control for materials to be impactful and promoting public interest, and the counter pressures from KCAO to primarily ensure even-handedness and objectivity. Coordination among the coordinators and their staff was sometimes difficult due to lack of clear lines of authority. One interviewee expressed concerns about a possible lack of balance due to ideological bends among staff members.

Staffing by KCAO was recognized by interviewees as adding value by creating a structure and a system for coordination and feedback. This included bringing the different stakeholders to the table and keeping them informed.

### **Sufficiency of resources**

By design, the program was not allowed to use public monies, making it fully dependent on external donations of time and resources for support. The program started with the commitment by Dick Spady through DDIR to donate to King County the funds necessary to operate the program. Between 2007 and 2011, Dick Spady donated \$320,000 to King County in support of the program.<sup>2</sup>

Donation requests were made to the public during each round, and the public responded generously at first with donations ranging from \$1 to \$100, averaging just under \$20 per donation for a total of \$1,367. This approach was not likely to have resulted in enough funding to support the program. If every one of the 4,500 survey takers had donated on average \$20 as their contribution to the process, CCF would have collected \$90,000 over three years. This amount would not have been enough to pay for the nine videos that were professionally produced at the cost of \$10,000 - \$20,000 a video, let alone the other program costs. Sufficient resources were provided for the program to operate for four years because the sponsors paid for its implementation.

### **Coordination and working relationships**

The organization of CCF required the involvement of a large number of people and a fluid working environment that allowed coordination across the different parties and interests. In addition to participation by the key actors (appointed CCF coordinators, program manager and County Auditor), some

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<sup>2</sup> This amount does not include expenses by DDIR to support coordination and other staff functions and for other production expenses, such as printing and video production.

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involvement was necessary by members of the steering committee, personal and policy staff of the County Council, and staff in the executive branch, as well as administrative support and outreach and communications support for the coordinators.

A complex and somewhat time-consuming review process was developed for each of the elements related to delivering the forums. This was to ensure that due process was applied at each step, that the products could be useful to the council policy-makers and citizens, and that they were accurate, even-handed, educational, and did not conflict with existing county policies. Individual interviews confirmed that appropriate relationships, promoted by the program manager, were established between the CCF coordinators and staff on one side and King County stakeholders on the other side. Participation of elected officials in the taping of the video was highlighted as an example of appropriate coordination and involvement.

### **General and Process-specific Outputs**

#### **Survey content and delivery**

The format of the survey (Opinionnaire<sup>®</sup>) remained constant over the nine rounds of forums, varying from 15 to 25 pages and always including three sections: Demographics, Topic, and Process. Although many individual comments criticized individual questions, feedback from forum participants indicated that the surveys adequately or effectively addressed the topic. For the five rounds for which a question about survey length was included, the survey was usually viewed as having an appropriate length. Round 5, on customer service and public engagement, with its 89 redundant topic questions was the exception. The requirement to use the Fast Forum method to produce the surveys restricted the formatting options for questions. For example, in order to allow participants to rank their top three options, a question, with its many choices, had to be repeated three times.

#### **Video and other information materials – satisfaction of the participants with the process of delivering videos and materials**

In survey responses, forum participants indicated that they were generally satisfied with the information presented in the videos.

Over the eight rounds of forums, there was an evolution of the format of the video. The first video on transportation included photos describing different sub-elements of the topic, interspaced with comments from stakeholders that were extracted from a longer conversation. Rounds 2 and 4, produced by and at KCTS Channel 9, featured panels of public officials in front of a live

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audience for a discussion facilitated by KCTS Producer and Host Enrique Cerna. Round 3 was produced by King County Media and included interviews of King County officials in an informal setting. The Round 5 video was made at the KOMO studio as a panel discussion also in front of a live audience. Starting with Round 6, videos were produced by Elements in Time and attempted to be more “edgy” and informal, with a wider range of speakers interspaced with fresh graphics.<sup>3</sup>

The last video, which was also viewed by the most people, elicited the highest number of positive response for its content (84% rated it as good or excellent), while Round 3 received the most negative review with almost a third of the viewers rating the content as poor to very poor. The KCTS (R2 and R4) and Elements in Time (R6, R7, R7b and R8) videos were all perceived favorably by at least 60% of the viewers.

For Round 7 only, online respondents were asked to comment on the background materials right after reading them. Of the 72 respondents who commented on the quality of the document, rather than on whether they agreed with the policies, 80% included a positive comment (“very informative,” “very helpful,” and “good information”). The handful of negative or partially negative comments stated problems with understanding the information or with a missing link in the text.

### **Forums – satisfaction of the participants with the process of delivering the forums**

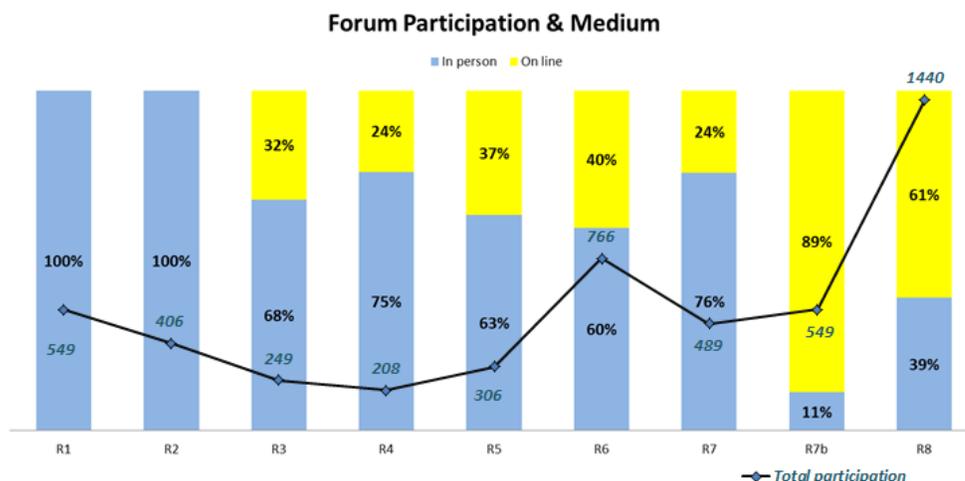
Forum participation evolved and eventually grew over the course of the nine rounds. For Rounds 1 and 2, in-person participation was the only option, and attendance ranged from 406 to 549. Between Round 3, when online surveys were first introduced, and Round 7, participation increased substantially to 1,440 participants. Online participation accounted for some of the increase in participation, and ranged from 25 percent to 40 percent of the respondents. For the last two rounds, a large majority of the respondents used the online option.

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 1 for a full description of the videos.

## 2. Process Evaluation

**Exhibit A:  
Total Forum  
Participation and  
Medium**



Source: Data for each round are based on forum reports.

The in-person forums also changed from small forums (usually less than eight participants) in councilors' homes or in libraries to larger events hosted by CCF coordinators often in collaboration with other entities such as nonprofits, schools and colleges, and churches.

In the 2010 survey, respondents identified a host of reasons that would make it more likely for them to attend a forum. The top three reasons were: 1) topic is timely and relevant; 2) I want decision-makers to know my opinion; and, 3) the forum location and time are convenient.

The ability to provide forums at convenient times and locations created a catch-22: participants who could not find convenient forums were unlikely to host or attend more forums, therefore further impacting the availability of convenient forums. While the small forum was considered the hallmark of the program, they were the most difficult to keep going and attendance issues were mentioned by many and identified as an issue in the 2010 evaluation.

A key to the success of Round 8, the last round of forums, was the offering of small grants (\$100 - \$2,000) by the CCF coordinators to community organizations that drew the most participants. With this financial incentive, many nonprofits and churches organized their own forums or sent emails to encourage their members to fill out the surveys.

In their retrospective feedback on the process, respondents to the 2012 satisfaction survey were generally satisfied in their recollection about the meetings. The highest level of satisfaction was with their ability to participate in the process. Fewer people were satisfied with the quality of the

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discussion. However, only two people had a negative recollection regarding the fairness of the facilitators, their own opportunity to contribute to the discussion, and the degree to which people were respectful of differing viewpoints.

An interviewee noted that participation in online or in-person forums offered a widely different experience and their survey results should be tabulated separately because online respondents were not required to view the video and they did not interact with anyone else.

### Reports

Reports were the delivery tool to communicate the results of the forums to the public, the county leadership, and the media.

Participants completed surveys either on paper or online and sent them to KCAO where the program manager entered the information in spreadsheets that were shared with the CCF coordinators.

While the ordinance called for CCF *to tabulate all surveys using the fast forum computer program and related technology developed by the Forum Foundation since 1970*, the Fast Forum program turned out to be of limited utility because it did not allow for well-formatted paper reports. Fast Forum reports were available for all rounds, but, starting with Round 2, KCAO developed a report format that included a summary of the responses and graphs for each data point. The program manager experimented with other reporting formats, including an effort to provide each county councilmember with a report that compared responses from their district to those of the complete pool of respondents. However, time constraints made this a one-time experiment.

Data entering and processing was time consuming which was more complex by the unique survey formatting. Done mostly by the program manager with some help from KCAO administrative staff, this process was intentionally deliberate to guarantee accuracy. At the same time, the CCF coordinators were anxious to make public the results of the survey soon after the conclusion of the surveys. This resulted in pressure to compress the time allowed for analysis of data and writing of the report in order to be more timely in publishing the results.

## 2. Process Evaluation

King County interviewees indicated that they were satisfied with the process of receiving advance copies of reports before they were released to the public. This allowed King County stakeholders to be prepared if the report solicited public or press interest.

For about half of the rounds, KCAO was invited to present the findings from the survey to a County Council committee, along with CCF coordinators and other participants depending on the topic. King County's Customer Service Director, for example, participated in the presentation to the Council on the results of the round on *Improving Customer Service and Public Engagement in King County*.

### Specific Program Features

#### Steering committee

The ordinance calls for an advisory citizen councilor steering committee, composed of all elected officials from across King County as well as higher education institution presidents and others, to have the following roles:

- Review and advise the auditor on the forum topic.
- Review and provide advisory recommendations regarding informational materials for the public.
- Advise on appointment of citizen councilor coordinator(s).
- Provide approval of the possible termination of the citizen councilor coordinator(s).

Accordingly, KCAO organized Steering Committee meetings prior to the start of each round of forums and sent invitations to all members listed in the ordinance. Attendance varied, but was typically 10-30 members or, most often, their staff representatives. Meetings were facilitated either by professional facilitators or by KCAO. Each meeting resulted in some consensus around topic selection.

CCF coordinators felt that the steering committee was an essential component of the process and offered an opportunity to consult with a larger pool of thinkers, although they noted that they had expected KCAO to provide stronger guidance on the outcome of the process. Some King County interviewees were concerned that there was no way to control for any bias in attendance and noted that ideally the public should have been driving the process. KCAO expressed the same concerns and widened the membership of the committee by taking advantage of a provision in the ordinance allowing the auditor to invite additional members.

## 2. Process Evaluation

Overall, the steering committee was not perceived as a major negative or positive factor in the implementation or performance of the program.

### **Initiative/ordinance**

As discussed earlier in this report, CCF was created when Initiative 24 qualified for the ballot in King County in 2007, and the Metropolitan King County Council adopted the entire Initiative as Ordinance 15896. As a result, it is likely that the King County leadership did not have the opportunity to develop ownership toward the ordinance, as would happen during the typical legislative process. This lack of ownership may have tempered their understanding and use of the program.

### **Funding**

The initiative sponsors planned for the program to be revenue neutral to taxpayers, i.e., no cost to the County to assist in implementing it. A fiscal impact analysis by the County identified costs for the auditor's office to fulfill the responsibilities envisioned for it. As noted in the previous section, funding came from a single private source. Some of the County interviewees recognized this situation as a double-edged sword. The source and quantity of funding allowed the program to exist and experiment with some innovative public engagement methods and the availability of private funding made it acceptable for taxpayers. At the same time, the funders ultimately controlled the timing of rounds and end date of the program, and the level of program effort. Also, the source of the funding was perceived by some as affecting the amount of buy-in by county leadership.

### 3. Impact / Outcome Evaluation

#### Section Introduction

**This section of the evaluation assesses CCF’s impact on the King County community and government.** More specifically, it examines CCF’s ability to serve as an efficient, high quality public engagement mechanism, and to achieve its mandated outcomes of enhancing citizen participation, civic engagement, and citizenship education; informing policy-making; improving on the traditional public hearing process; and building social capital and helping strengthen the community.

There are two limitations to conducting an impact evaluation: 1) most of the data is subjective and qualitative, and 2) attempts to evaluate whether the program made a difference in the life of participants and for those who received the information are limited because it is unrealistic to expect to know what the outcomes would have been in the absence of CCF.

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#### Program Cost Impact

##### Cost to government

According to the mandated intent of the program, CCF was implemented without direct cost to King County government. The program was required to be self-funded without taxpayer dollars through voluntary contributions from participants, civic-minded citizens, businesses, organizations and foundations.

Contributions, mostly from DDIR, paid for all expenses incurred by CCF including employment and expenses for coordinators, deputy coordinators, outreach and communication staff, the program manager position in KCAO, video production, and printing and distribution of all materials.

There were additional expenses incurred by county government, mostly through coordination, review and participation time of staff and officials. These expenses were absorbed as part of the responsibilities of the county and staff required to participate. Staff from across the county were involved in the process during each round of forums. After each steering committee meeting, in which many county staff participated, the program manager met with policy staff from different branches and departments throughout King County to explore potential issues related to the topic recommended by the steering committee. More meetings and other communications, either informational or to resolve emerging issues, occurred as the forum survey and background materials were developed. Once forums were completed and the report prepared by the program manager, KCAO requested time to present to a Council committee, provided briefings to council member’s offices, and sent reports to all interested parties.

### 3. Impact / Outcome Evaluation

At KCAO, while the entire program manager's and some administrative staff's time was covered by the donation, the auditor's and office manager's time was not. Both invested time in providing supervision and administration. Consensus from interviews of county staff was that the time invested in the program was well spent since it created a beneficial exchange between the public and county decision-makers and staff at little cost to the taxpayers.

#### **Cost to participants**

There was no direct cost to participate in the forums, except for possible transportation costs to reach a meeting or some incidental costs (cookies, heating of a room) to the forum hosts. No complaints were recorded by participants or hosts related to potential cost of participating, although a couple of potential hosts suggested in the 2010 survey that they might have hosted if some compensation was offered for refreshments and other incidental costs. One survey respondent said that the price of gas prevented him from attending a forum. Time is often cited as the reason for not being able to participate in in-person forums.

In terms of time invested, most forums lasted 60 to 90 minutes, not including commute time. Online participation took a minimum of 10 minutes to complete the survey, in addition to time spent watching the video (12-25 minutes) and/or reading background materials. Most online respondent invested about 30 minutes in their survey.

No complaints were recorded from participants about the overall forum taking too long, although there were many complaints about elements of the forum taking too long, specifically the video (10 to 29 percent of participants saying it was too long) and the survey (18 to 49 percent calling it too long). Although most attendees were satisfied with their participation in the forums, a few respondents considered attending a forum time not well spent. They offered a variety of reasons such as the quality of the materials or low attendance level. Another reason related to the outcomes of the forums is that they were unsure whether their participation would have any impact.

#### **Quality of Public Engagement**

A set of criteria developed by AmericaSpeaks, an organization founded to provide citizens with a greater voice in the policy-making process, are recognized in an IBM Center for the Business of Government report as essential to distinguish high-quality public participation from other

### 3. Impact / Outcome Evaluation

participatory activities. CCF is evaluated against those criteria, which are listed below.

These criteria do not exactly match the mandated purpose of the CCF program. For example, the authorizing ordinance focuses on enhancing citizen participation, civic engagement and citizenship education in government. One of AmericaSpeaks criteria relates to decision-makers using the results in policy-making. This was not a stated expectation of the program. However, it is one often referenced in feedback received from interviewees, including forum participants.

**☑ Educate participants: Does CCF provide accessible information to citizens about the issues and choices involved, so that they can articulate informed opinion?**

The 2010 evaluation looked closely at CCF's ability to influence the three goals related to educating participants that are explicitly identified in the ordinance: *enhancing citizen participation, civic engagement, and citizenship education.*

The evaluation, which looked at Rounds 1-4, concluded that the program had been relatively successful in meeting these goals. In later forums, the question was directly asked to participants and 61, 64 and 63 percent of the respondents in Rounds 6, 7, and 8 respectively felt better informed. This impression held over time, with 52% of respondents to the 2012 satisfaction survey still feeling better informed months after participating in the forums.

**☑ Frame issues neutrally: offer an unbiased framing of the policy issue in a way that allows the public to struggle with the most difficult choices facing decision-makers.**

As part of the forum process, participants in 6 of the 9 rounds were asked whether they viewed the video as unbiased, and in 3 of the 9 rounds were asked whether the survey was unbiased. For the video, 74-84% (except for Round 3 with 65%) and, for the survey, 84-86% of respondents thought that both were fair and even-handed.

Similar positive ratings were received when questions about fairness were asked as part of the 2012 satisfaction survey. Respondents remembered the facilitators, process, organization, and information as being fair or neutral. In addition, the almost unanimous view from respondents to the 2010 survey

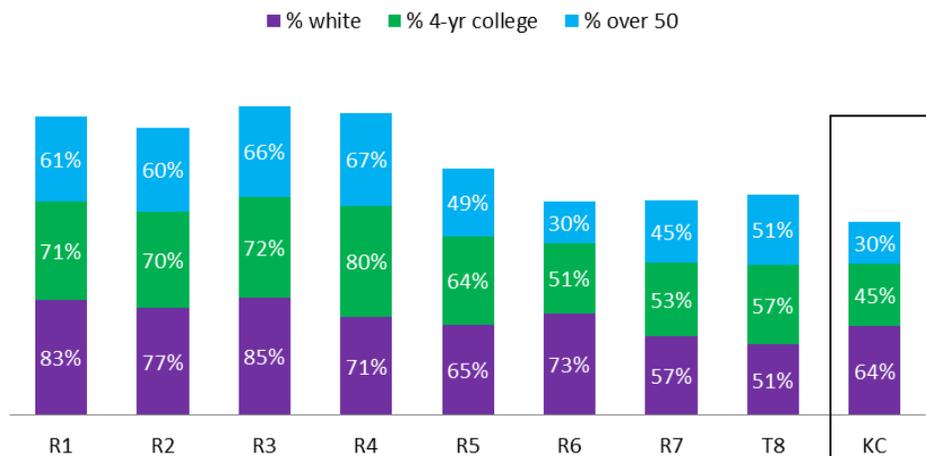
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that was administered at the conclusion of R4 was that all four topics were considered very relevant and timely.

**☑Achieve diversity: involve a demographically balanced group of citizens reflective of the impacted community.**

The first few rounds of forums attracted a self-selected population that was older, better educated and included a higher percent of Whites than the general population of King County. During the early presentations to the King County Council, this issue was raised as a concern and CCF coordinators responded by investing time and resources to outreach to different populations. Several outreach coordinators were tasked with reaching out to young people and to different minority groups. CCF also invested in a wide range of communications media, such as ads in small neighborhood newspapers and a strong presence with social media. Starting with Round 5, those efforts started to bear results. The last three rounds matched the countywide demographic distribution for a few measures that were chosen as indicators because they were particularly skewed in the early rounds. The chart below illustrates how race, education level, and age of CCF participants changed over time, and how they compared to countywide demographics.

**Exhibit B:  
Demographic  
Distribution of  
Participants**



Source: Round data from forum reports. King County demographic figures based on 2010 Census data

During the last two rounds, CCF was particularly successful in reaching out to underprivileged groups that are usually not included in the civic process. The program offered small grants (\$100 to \$2,000) to organizations such as church groups, universities, women’s shelters, and homeless shelters, based on the number of members/attendees they could bring to forums. Those organizations, often with logistical support and food from the CFF

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coordinators, organized forums on site in churches, colleges, shelters or offices.

**⊗Get buy-in from policy-makers: achieve commitment from decision-makers to engage in the process and use the results in policy-making.**

There are no direct statistics to help answer this question. One related question asked at four out of the nine rounds was whether participation in the forums had positively influenced the participants' views as to whether King County listens to their opinion. One-half to 75% of respondents thought it had. The same question was asked during the 2012 satisfaction survey and only 14% of respondents agreed that the impact was positive or very positive, vs. 37% who said negative to very negative. This was the most negative answer to the questions asked about the process and outcomes of the nine rounds of forums.

In open-ended comments, participants shared their concerns that their involvement had only limited impact on decision-makers. This was raised as one of the key weaknesses and challenges in the SWOC (Strength Weakness Opportunity Challenge) section of the 2012 satisfaction survey (e.g., “real influence on policy appears to be minimal,” “I still wonder how much King County listens to the responses gathered at CCF events,” and “to get the politicians to understand that opinions represent the concerns of the people and not to ignore them”). While it was not mentioned as a strength, many people viewed it as an opportunity (“make a difference in the political process,” “to have more transparency in government,” “to bring to the politicians the concerns and priorities of the community”).

Tangible evidence of how county decision-makers use information from the forums was not documentable. Interviews showed that some in King County government viewed the information resulting from the forums with skepticism due to perceptions that it represented a specific agenda espoused by the funders or because it was not statistically representative. However, interviews of key CCF and county policy staff also reveal another view. Passage of the ordinance, with all councilmembers voting for it, was viewed as implicit buy-in. Additional support was demonstrated by the interest in briefings of round results by councilmembers and others in the legislative and executive branches. County officials and their staff also participated in framing the issues through their involvement in the video discussions or their review of forum materials. There are also instances of councilmembers and

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other officials quoting from survey results and referencing CCF in discussions of the County's interest in citizen engagement.

**☑Support quality deliberation: facilitate high-quality discussion that ensures all voices are heard.**

The goal of CCF was to start a dialogue rather than deliberation, although the ordinance talks about providing materials necessary *for consideration by the citizen councilor network participants in their dialogues and deliberations.*

Overall, in retrospect, participants remembered being quite satisfied with the quality and civility of the discussions they had during the forums. King County and CCF staff who observed or participated in forums felt that good discussions had happened in the context of in-person forums, although they also felt that the survey questions were crafted to elicit polarizing responses rather than foster deliberative discussions to reach consensus.

**☉Demonstrated public consensus: produce information that clearly highlights the public's shared priorities.**

As noted above, CCF was not designed as a consensus-promoting vehicle. As part of the R4 survey, participants were asked if *participating in the discussion today with your fellow Citizen Councilors made a difference on how you view the topic.* Eighty-seven percent said that it did, and half of those said that they *responded differently than I would have before this meeting on some questions because of the new perspective I now have.*

**☑Sustain involvement: support ongoing involvement by the public on the issue/topic, including feedback, monitoring and evaluation.**

For 5 out of 9 rounds, the question as to whether participation in the forum will lead to further involvement in civic issues related to the forum topics was asked. Between 50%-75% of the respondents thought that it would.

When the same question was asked in the 2012 satisfaction survey, 55% still felt that participation had led or would lead to more civic involvement. This suggests that participation in CCF could lead to increased civic involvement. CCF asked participants to indicate if they had attended previous forums for 4 out of 9 rounds. On an average, half of the participants had attended at least one previous forum. While those numbers do not allow for an overall estimate of recurring participation, they appear to suggest a certain level of sustained involvement on the part of participants.

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#### Other Outcomes

#### Program independence

One of CCF's distinguishing features was its hybrid configuration: part community-based, part government program. Its funding structure reflected its unusual organization and accountability structure. Externally sourced funding allowed the program to distance itself from the direct influence of county decision-makers as it would have been as a county-funded program, but replaced it with the influence of a small group of self-selected individuals. The source of the funding was viewed by several interviewees as causing or contributing to King County leadership's perceived lack of interest in the program. With the total cost of the project conservatively estimated around \$500,000 (i.e., approximately \$100/completed survey), some interviewees also felt that a lot of money was spent for relatively little impact.

Although the program was housed within its office, the KCAO had limited influence over it. According to program design, the CCF coordinators, with the help of experts, officials, scholars and others, are intended to be the original developers of all materials. KCAO's authority is to make the final determination concerning the suitability of all materials before these are distributed, rather than participate in their development. With time, KCAO became more involved in the development of the materials to try to anticipate possible concerns and make the process more efficient, but remained the final authority on whether materials could be used. The funders, on the other hand, retained the authority to determine the level of funding and what would be funded, if anything. This shared ownership of the program mechanism was intended to bring credibility and legitimacy to the program and to create an equal partnership between CCF and King County.

In individual interviews of King County and CCF staff, the views regarding the program's independence varied widely. Some individuals felt that the County exerted too much influence and control on the program, and others that the program was widely influenced by the funders. Both sides recognized the moderating influence of KCAO as a positive feature.

#### Benefits for the government

In spite of the existence of a host of public engagement programs, more CCF respondents in surveys disagreed than agreed that King County is willing to listen, that King County ensures that public engagement serves the needs of the participants, that King County is clear and open about its processes, and that King County promotes a culture of participation. These results are

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consistent with those of the King County 2009 community survey that indicated that as many people held negative views than positive views as to whether King County is willing to be influenced by its residents or whether residents can participate in decision-making. This indicates that many county residents are either unaware of the county public engagement efforts or consider them inadequate.

The limited scale of CCF makes it unlikely that it could have had a significant impact on making the public across King County better informed or more trusting, but it did contribute to that effort, as shown above. Not only did CCF provide topic-specific information to the 4,500 survey-takers, but it also provided them with general information about the role of King County as a local and regional government, addressing the two King County community surveys' findings that the public has a limited understanding of what King County does. The results of the participant satisfaction surveys support this. Moreover, King County policy staff interviewees recognized that the program was a good way to engage people who would not be otherwise involved.

Using the IAP2 scale of public engagement<sup>4</sup> as a five-level yardstick where informing is the lowest level of public impact and empowering the highest, the CCF program clearly contributes to the first two levels. CCF informs by providing the public with balanced information to assist them in understanding issues and, during the CCF forums, the public is consulted in the process to obtain feedback on policy alternatives or decisions. The program offers a formula that could make it an effective mechanism to move further to the right on the spectrum and involve the public, that is, *work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered*.

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 2 for definition.

# Appendix I

## Forum Rounds and Video Description

### Round 1: Transportation - Public Priorities, Choices and Funding

(June 28 - July 20, 2008)

The first forum video on transportation was privately produced and included interviews of King County Executive Ron Sims, Council Chair Julia Patterson, and transportation experts Steve Mullin (Washington Roundtable president), Kemper Freeman (Bellevue Square owner), Tim Gould (Sierra Club), and Bruce Agnew (Discovery Institute's Cascadia Center).

### Round 2: Citizen Priorities for County Government: Budget and Strategic Priorities

(February 21 - March 22, 2009)

The second forum video offered a panel discussion taped at Seattle public TV station KCTS and facilitated by Enrique Cerna on the topic of the King County budget. Panel members included: King County Councilmembers Larry Phillips and Reagan Dunn, Sheriff Sue Rahr, Issaquah Mayor and President of the Association of Suburban Cities Ava Frisinger, King County Budget Director Bob Cowan, President of the Washington Research Council Al Ralston, and King County Alliance for Health and Human Services Mike Heinisch.

### Round 3: Values and Performance of King County Government

(May 23 - June 21, 2009)

For the third round of forums, the video was produced by King County Media Department and featured a welcome by King County Auditor Cheryle Broom, and King County Executive Kurt Triplett, Councilmembers Larry Gossett and Jane Hague, talking individually about the county strategic planning effort and their priorities for the region.

### Round 4: Public Safety - Law and Justice

(September 26 - October 25, 2009)

The fourth round's video followed the format of the second round, also taped at KCTS and facilitated by Enrique Cerna, but on the topic of public safety. Panelists were King County elected officials: Councilmembers Kathy Lambert and Bob Ferguson, Sheriff Sue Rahr, Prosecutor Dan Satterberg, and Judges Barbara Linde and Bruce Hilyer.

### Round 5: Improving Customer Service and Public Engagement in King County

(May 1 - June 13, 2010)

The topic for Round 5 was on improving customer service and public engagement in King County. It was introduced with a video featuring a discussion on what constitutes good service and appropriate access and program accountability by County Executive Dow Constantine,

## Appendix I (continued)

Council Chair Bob Ferguson, and PRR Executive Rita Brogan, which was facilitated by Crosscut's Joe Copeland.

### Round 6: Citizen Priorities for Government During Challenging Economic Times

(September 11 - October 23, 2010)

For Round 6, 7 and 8, the video format was changed with the intent of being shorter, more conversational and more attractive to young people. However, Round 6, on the King County budget still included several King County officials, Executive Dow Constantine, Councilmembers Julia Patterson and Reagan Dunn, Sheriff Sue Rahr, Judge Bruce Hilyer, Budget Director Dwight Dively, along with Stranger Editor Dominic West.

### Round 7: Equity and Economic Opportunity Across King County

(April 16 - May 29, 2011)

The video for the seventh round of forums on equity and social justice was the first to feature a diverse group of interviewees that included only two King County officials: Councilmembers Larry Gossett and Kathy Lambert.

### Round 7b: Public Engagement Framework in Unincorporated King County

(August 19 - September 9, 2011)

A second Round 7 video was produced based on the same model to reach out to residents of unincorporated areas. It included the same two councilmembers, as well as Sheriff Rahr and King County employee Lauren Smith, Land Use Policy Advisor, as well as unincorporated area residents.

### Round 8: King County Budget: Achieving Sustainability Together

(September 17 - October 23, 2011)

The final video, again on the King County budget, included as speakers Deputy Executive Fred Jarrett, Metro Transit General Manager Kevin Desmond, State Auditor Brian Sonntag, and King County Record and Licensing Services Director Lorraine Patterson.

## Appendix 2

### Polarization Rating

#### **Polarization Rating<sup>5</sup>**

Polarization Rating is a percentage and first order derivative of the number of persons participating who were polarized and answered yes or no excluding those who abstained or objected, and it is a measure of the weight given a question by those participating while the second indicator (on a yes/no question) is composed of the Consensus Rating that is a percentage and second order derivative of the number of persons participating being the percent positive of those who were polarized and answered yes or no excluding those who abstained or objected so it is a measure of the opinion of those persons participating who were polarized thus this enables the elimination of showing the % yes and % no on any row, and since our Fast Forum program can reorder all questions by the Polarization Rating people only need to look at one number the Consensus Rating, to deduce the meaning instead of two and that one number accurately reflects the opinion of every individual proportionately regardless of the number participating.

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<sup>5</sup> Retrieved from the Forum Foundation.

## Statement of Scope, Objectives & Methodology

### Scope:

This review evaluates the effectiveness of the Countywide Community Forums structure as originally established by the ordinance and implemented between 2007 and 2011 for nine rounds of forums as a public engagement mechanism and its success at meeting expected outcomes for the program and for public engagement. It assesses the program model's prospects and viability as a government-sponsored public engagement mechanism.

### Objectives:

- Evaluate the intent and performance of the CCF program to determine what worked and what did not
- Evaluate the ability of CCF to deliver and collect information in an unbiased way
- Examine whether the program achieved its expected outcomes of engaging and educating the public and informing decision-makers
- Evaluate whether CCF worked as an effective mechanism for the public to engage in civic issues
- Assess whether CCF meets accepted standards as a public engagement mechanism
- Identify lessons learned or conclusions that can be considered in advancing citizen/public engagement in King County

### Statement of Compliance with Government Auditing Standards:

This evaluation was performed as a non-audit service as defined under Government Auditing Standards (GAS) and conformed with the King County Auditor's Office Policies and Protocol for sufficiency of evidence which reference selected auditing standards.

### Methodology:

This assessment was completed using the program evaluation approach proposed by Tina Nabatchi in *A Manager's Guide to Evaluating Citizen Participation*, published by the IBM Center for The Business of Government. The following approaches and resources were used for this evaluation:

1. Archival documents, reviewed and analyzed:
  - Ordinance 15896 -  
<http://mkcclegisearch.kingcounty.gov/View.ashx?M=F&ID=792742&GUID=88B2245E-C5F3-42F2-8E71-AFA6DFF625ED>
  - Opinionnaire survey responses and comments from the participants for Rounds 1-8
  - December 2009 online SurveyMonkey survey sent to every participant who had signed up to receive CCF information – 331 responses
  - Countywide Community Forums: Program Evaluation. March 2, 2010. Cheryle Broom and Chantal Stevens  
<http://www.kingcounty.gov/operations/auditor/Reports/Year/~//media/operations/auditor/documents/2010Documents/CCFProgramEvaluation2010.ashx>  
Evaluation based on 2009 survey and on Opinionnaire responses to Rounds 1-4

## Statement of Scope, Objectives & Methodology (continued)

- Councilor satisfaction survey (April/May 2012): a SurveyMonkey poll that sent to all individuals who had participated in CCF forums to date -- 78 responses
2. In person interviews of King County Council and Executive staff and CCF Coordinators (May/June 2012)
  3. Documents on public engagement:
    - IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation  
[http://www.iap2.org/associations/4748/files/IAP2%20Spectrum\\_vertical.pdf](http://www.iap2.org/associations/4748/files/IAP2%20Spectrum_vertical.pdf)
    - Public Deliberation: A Manager's Guide to Citizen Engagement, Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer and Lars Hasselblad Torres, AmericaSpeaks, includes the description of AmericaSpeaks, seven principles for high-quality public participation  
<http://www.businessofgovernment.org/sites/default/files/LukensmeyerReport.pdf>.