

Understanding Civic Engagement

Stories about civic engagement can be inspiring. A group of teens see an underused section of a park and propose that it be transformed into a community garden. They write letters to elected officials, hold community meetings, get approval, sponsor a fundraising drive, and then it is time for clean-up and construction work, and soon everyone is celebrating the new garden.

Sometimes a community project is that simple. But more often, the work is not always simple, and often there is a much longer process, with setbacks and complications, and with many long meetings and periods of waiting.

If you ask people who have been active in community work for many years for examples of projects that were simple and successful, they will have some good stories. If you also ask for examples of projects that moved slowly with only small successes, they will also have many examples. This part of the lesson looks at some myths and realities of civic engagement.



The story of the People Before Highways movement that resulted in the Southwest Corridor Park is one of those inspiring stories. Every citizens group and every neighborhood that was involved in that movement continues to tell the story with pride, sharing the story that “we stopped the highway.”

The heroes of that moment were people from all neighborhoods, races, backgrounds and roles, who met and spoke up and organized. The most famous moment in that work came in 1970, with the People Before Highways march on the State House.

Following that moment, another hero of this work was the newly inaugurated governor, Francis Sargent, who had been a long-time advocate for highway building, and who, after hearing from the demonstrators, stated very simply “we were wrong” and moved forward with public transportation and parkland along the corridor instead of the highway.

But between the decision to stop the highway plans and the opening of the new park, there was a period of almost 20 years of planning and construction. When the park finally opened, park planners described thousands of hours of community meetings. The park was designed by the hard work of city planners working with multiple neighborhood groups.



Community meetings were sometimes exciting forums for sharing ideas and vision for the new corridor. But many of the meetings were less-than-exciting, with lots of behind-the-scenes work by city planners and engineers, contract negotiations with builders and landscapers, and much more. Some community meetings were just updates about the progress of different phases of the project, forums for complaints about the impact of construction, or long discussions about where to put a particular fence or park entrance or subway vent.

This lesson presents myths and realities about civic engagement. As you read, see if you can think of examples of these myths and realities from history, from current events, or from your knowledge of community work in your city or neighborhood.

FIVE MYTHS ABOUT CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

1. The “One Hero” Myth	Big changes are usually not the work of one person alone; but the work of many people working together. Even when one person becomes the symbol of a larger movement, there is often a bigger, and perhaps more powerful, story of many people working together in different roles, over a long period of time.
2. The “One Moment” Myth	Big changes usually don’t happen all in one moment; but are part of a longer series of events that move the story forward. While there may be one pivotal moment that stands as a symbol of a major change, there is usually a longer story of many other events that contributed to that work.
3. The Myth of “Deficit Based” Thinking	In order to tell a dramatic story about a community project, the storyteller sometimes portrays a “before and after” picture that over-emphasizes or even falsely portrays problems or “deficits” in the “before” picture. It is more powerful, though maybe less dramatic, to focus on the “assets” (or strengths) of the community.
4. The Myth of Easy Answers	Some community issues present a sharp choice between two very different, very clear choices, with a clear right and wrong. But in the long run, the work of community groups is often focused on more complex decision making, with the need to balance different interests and community needs and to work through compromises and consensus-building.
5. The Mythical Unnamed “They”	The pronoun “they” is often used to portray unnamed and unknown persons or groups that control decisions in the community. It is more powerful to be able to identify specific agencies and organizations, understanding city, state and federal government, and to understand the work of different agencies and organizations, including public, private and nonprofit organizations, as well as informal community groups, that help to shape a community.

FIVE MYTHS ABOUT CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

1. **THE ONE-HERO MYTH.** Big changes are usually not the work of one person alone; but the work of many people working together. Even when one person becomes the symbol of a larger movement, there is often a bigger, and perhaps more powerful, story of many people working together in different roles, over a long period of time.
2. **THE ONE-MOMENT MYTH.** Big changes usually don’t happen all in one moment; but are part of a longer series of events that move the story forward. While there may be one pivotal moment that stands as a symbol of a major change, there is usually a longer story of many other events that contributed to that work.

3. THE MYTH OF DEFICIT-BASED THINKING. In order to tell a dramatic story, the storyteller sometimes portrays a “before and after” picture that over-emphasizes or even falsely portrays problems or deficits in the “before” picture. For example, *have you ever seen a movie about a school that was terrible, where “no one cared” until one heroic leader came along and changed everything? That type of story combines the myth of “one hero” and the myth of “one moment”, and the myth of “deficit-based” thinking. A more complicated, but more powerful, story focuses on the assets of the community. An asset-based story might not make as good a movie, but is a more powerful story: “Here is a school where parents and local businesses are very supportive, and children and teachers work hard and care about their school. We had some challenges in the school and so we worked together and improved the school through community effort.”*
4. THE MYTH OF EASY ANSWERS. Some community issues present a sharp choice between two very different, very clear choices. But in the long run, the work is not as simple, and involves different interests and community needs, and involves working through compromises and consensus-building. This work often involves learning about behind-the-scenes information about budgets, construction costs, civil engineering, urban design, architecture, landscape design, local geography and environmental conservation.
5. THE MYTHICAL UNNAMED “THEY.” Have you ever heard someone complain that “‘they’ want to put a highway right through this neighborhood” or “‘they’ don’t care about the parks in this neighborhood.” or “‘they’ only care about building luxury housing.” The pronoun “they” is often used to portray unnamed and unknown persons or groups. It is more powerful to be able to identify specific agencies and organizations, understanding city, state and federal government, and different branches of government, and different agencies and organizations, including public, private and nonprofit organizations, as well as informal community groups, that help to shape a community.

ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION TOPICS:

[1.] MYTHS AND REALITIES:

Using the list of “five myths” as inspiration, write your own list of “five realities” or “myths and realities” or “do’s and don’ts” for civic engagement.

[2.] VIDEO:

Watch the video “Understanding Federal, State and Local Government” to learn more about the differences among these three levels of government.

[3.] READING HISTORY: WHOSE VISION CREATED THE EMERALD NECKLACE?

The history of the Emerald Necklace is a great story with many different angles to the story. Look at these opening paragraphs from three versions of this history. After reading each one, answer the question: whose vision created the Emerald Necklace? What differences do you notice among the three different sources of this history? After reading all three, how would you tell the story of the creation of the Emerald Necklace?

WHOSE VISION CREATED THE EMERALD NECKLACE?

[1.] From Boston Magazine "Landmarks" series:

As you traverse the seven-mile-long series of meadows, marshlands, and roadways, you're living out the vision of Frederick Law Olmsted. The country's first professional landscape architect, Olmsted believed city parks should be sanctuaries from the clamor and grit of urban life, providing peaceful settings and picturesque views as a contrast to their industrial surroundings. When Olmsted successfully applied this design theory to New York's Central Park in 1857, Boston took note, eventually hiring him in the 1870s to build not just one large park, but an entire park system.

<https://www.bostonmagazine.com/property/2018/05/15/emerald-necklace-boston-history/>

[2.] Boston Urban Planning Website

In the late 19th century, **a citizens' group petitioned to the city to reserve space for public parks to encourage community and a sense of identity to public space.** In response to the public's petition, the City of Boston created a Park Commission to be responsible for two key agendas: first to establish a park system and second to fix the sewage problem occurring in Back Bay. Without any delay, the Park Commission sought help from the distinguished landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted.

Quoted in: <https://bostonurbanplanning.weebly.com/emerald-necklace.html>

From the National Parks Service history lesson plans:

In 1870, the city of Boston was an overcrowded, noisy, and dirty place. Its population had expanded rapidly because of the Industrial Revolution, and the peninsular port city was crammed with buildings and people. Many of the people who lived in the crowded city did not have the opportunity to travel to the country for fresh air and relaxation. **In 1875, the Boston City Council passed a Park Act** to help address these concerns. The park commissioners turned to Frederick Law Olmsted, the landscape architect who had created New York City's Central Park, to plan a park system for the city that would provide residents with an opportunity to enjoy the benefits of nature.

Frederick Law Olmsted believed that planned parks and open spaces improved the health and disposition of those who endured the claustrophobic and often unsanitary conditions of city life. For Boston, he envisioned a "Green Ribbon" of parks that would encircle the city. Such a system would suit the geography of Boston as well as allow easier access to nature than one large central park. Over the next several years, he and his firm would create and weave together a series of parks that became known as Boston's Emerald Necklace.

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/the-emerald-necklace-boston-s-green-connection.htm>

