



## DEMOCRACY IN A LEARNING MODE

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We need a new type of person. One who plants seeds of community transformation as he works in a parallel profession. Our times require creative ways to bring people into a new way of thinking....and it always involves a new learning experience.

Andrew Cohill is that type of person. No longer excited by the prospect of more of the same, he searches for new ways to add value and yet give new meaning as Director of the Knowledge Democracy Center. A voracious reader, Andrew is one of the leading authorities in the new field of “community networking.” As Director of the Blacksburg Electronic Village, he has become intrigued in how to use the Internet and other telecommunications technology to broaden and deepen the potential of direct citizen democracy. Intrigued by futures studies, Andrew has recently asked the question. “how can the potential of direct electronic democracy be grafted onto our present system to allow us to evolve a 21<sup>st</sup> century approach to democracy, a Knowledge Democracy.” The question has lingered in his mind for several years. It is as if some new message was trying to be heard.

One day several years ago in a Learning Communities seminar, Andrew suddenly sat upright in his chair and said, “we have to deepen our relationships. They are the only things that will give us certainty in our society of constant change.” From that moment, he has worked with me and others to develop the concept of Knowledge Democracy and Direct Consensus Democracy. Recognizing the need to rethink community decision processes so that interested individuals will take the time to be involved in issues for the good of the overall community, the concept of Direct Consensus Democracy is a three phase process that can be used in areas as small as a neighborhood, and as large as a region ( with potential to evolve to a national level ). It utilizes electronic infrastructure to 1) identify issues of concern, 2) hold a citizens congress to identify key factors for the number one issue, and 3) utilize diverse teams of citizens to develop strategies for which citizen then vote their preference. It is a method of “direct democracy” that seeks to involve different points of view to build a consensus on key issues for the good of the community. With this in mind, a Knowledge Democracy Center has been established to work with pilot communities and neighborhoods to develop the concept of Direct Consensus Democracy.

## Planning the Transition

It is the assumption of the Knowledge Democracy Center that we are in the early stages of a transition to an electronic republic, using a term Larry Grossman has made popular. For this to occur, we are going to have to "learn" new ways of making groups decisions directly. The Knowledge Democracy Center believes that a hybrid system of face to face and electronic decision making will need to be integrated.

How is this system to be designed? How will this system operate effectively? How will this system respond to the fast pace of change? No one knows....so communities will need to become involved with research and development projects to test out new ideas and feed back what works and what doesn't.

That's the role that pilot communities will play.....to be a learning opportunity for the next stage of democracy. The future of 21st century learning will have many attributes. No part of the learning experience in the future will be more important than to learn how to transform our traditional democracy to a 21st century type of democracy....so that our citizens feel an ability to be directly involved with the decisions that will impact their lives at the local level. The following is a preliminary handbook for a neighborhood experiment in 21st century democracy. If the future of learning is a journey in rethinking what learning means, then the Knowledge Democracy Center's experiment in Direct Consensus Democracy will be an interesting ride.

One of the near term goals of the Knowledge Democracy Center is identify neighborhoods in local communities throughout the nation and world that would be interested in working in collaboration to develop the methods and techniques of Direct Consensus Democracy.... in a way that would support each neighborhood's need to build consensus on key issues of importance.

With this in mind, the following is a draft for a handbook that can be used by residents of any neighborhood that integrates an electronic infrastructure with the direct decision making process of Direct Consensus Democracy. Its focus is the individual contribution that residents can make to build effective strategies through reciprocal interaction of each other. We feel it is time for people to begin to think about the common good, and learn to sacrifice some wants in support of ideas that will strengthen our neighborhoods and society. It is to this end that the Knowledge Democracy Center is dedicated.

## DIRECT CONSENSUS DEMOCRACY HOME HANDBOOK

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## What is Direct Consensus Democracy

As a result of a partnership with the Knowledge Democracy Center in Blacksburg, VA, up to five interested neighborhoods in the US will be the initial sites of an experiment in 21st century democracy call Direct Consensus Democracy (DCD). The use of the DCD process will allow all the citizens of these neighborhoods to be involved in framing issues within a "futures context," as well as voting in collaboration with each other residents to develop an answer for the common good.

It will be used in two ways. First, to set an agenda for the community on an annual basis. Secondly, to provide a way to make decisions for any important issue that arises during the year.

Many neighborhoods will utilize DSL technology network to allow all residents the ability to access local community data bases as well as information from throughout the world. All issues will be considered within the framework of future trends and 21st century assumptions. The DCD Project Coordinator will facilitate both types of DCD processes.

## Why is Direct Consensus Democracy Important?

It is important to understand the significant difference between Direct Consensus Democracy and traditional methods of decision making. The essential difference is this. In traditional decision making, input is given to elected officials who then make decisions for the community. The elected officials often make decisions as they perceive the need rather than facilitate a decision for the common good.

Using the structure of DCD, interested citizens and residents are able to be involved with all phases of any decision process. Any decision is facilitated to develop a shared vision of consensus. In addition, any decision made using a DCD process will be appropriate for a 21st century context because future trends are added to the thinking and generative dialogue leading up to the decision.

DCD is unique in its approach to building trust and collaboration among neighborhood residents. The DCD process is an important factor in insuring that the electronic infrastructure of any neighborhood is utilized to build trust. A designated Strategic Civic Room allows face to face dialogue for those interested in taking the time to talk together. The combination of electronic means and face to face dialogue insures that residents will feel in control and in collaboration at the same time.

#### How Does Direct Consensus Democracy Work?

Direct Consensus Democracy utilizes electronic and face to face means to integrate appropriate information from different points of view with direct decision making processes leading to a shared vision for the common good.

DCD will be used in neighborhoods in two ways. First, to set an annual agenda for the community dealing with the perceived most important issues. Secondly, to provide a way to make decisions for the common good when an unexpected issue needs addressing. In each case, the DCD process focuses on three phases:

Phase One: The survey phase. Its objective is to identify issues and concerns that are perceived as the most important.

Phase Two: The appropriate knowledge phase. This phase emphasizes the ability to understand the issue while minimizing personal bias. Its objective is to identify key factors related to the issue(s) identified and to engage in deliberative, generative dialogue about the issue to insure a true context of understanding prior to any decision being made.

Phase Three: The strategic decision phase. This phase focuses on developing specific alternatives to resolve any issue to the benefit of the common good of neighborhood residents.

DCD supports local governance in any neighborhood by providing electronic mechanisms and generative dialogue to provide a rich environment for discussions of community issues and tools to minimize conflict and support voting.

#### Electronic Network

Every person in each neighborhood will have access to a Local Area Network through a Digital Subscriber Loop. Every resident of pilot neighborhoods will have an electronic mailbox ( email address ) and a personal security code. There will be an online directory for all residents and administrative offices for the community. There will be an electronic "town commons" where people can meet and chat. There will be a part of the web site dedicated to questionnaires to determine the opinions of neighborhood residents.

A neighborhood LAN will provide an online archive and database ( history base ) that supports the development of a permanent record of the life of the community in words, pictures, audio and video recordings. Every resident will be able to contribute to this archive as well as access its information at any time to refresh ones memory. This will prevent problems of remembering facts and eliminate the "he said, she said" problem.

All residents will have immediate access to members of the elected council. The Project Coordinator will be responsible for providing timely updates of information pertinent to any issue under discussion. The Project Coordinator will also provide appropriate information from diverse points of view as requested by any resident group working to resolve any issue of importance.

All residents of participating neighborhoods will be given comprehensive "coaching" to assure that they are comfortable with the use of DCD. The Project Coordinator will be accessible at any time to answer questions.

### Face to Face Generative Dialogue in the Strategic Civic Room

The Direct Consensus Democracy Process recognizes the need for all residents to get to know each other and be able to call each other by name. Unique to communities of this type is a civic area which has been designed to enhance the civility of relationships among those living in pilot neighborhoods. It is called the Strategic Civic Room, and utilizes both effective layout of space and technology to enhance collaboration among involved residents.

The Strategic Civic Room is designed with concentric circles of "decision desks." Each "decision desk" incorporates a space for writing and a computer which is linked not only to the Internet for information retrieval, but also to the neighborhood data base which stores any information utilized for previous issues.

The capacity of the room allows 100 people at any time to come and be involved with "generative dialogue" to understand various elements and implications of any issue within a futures context. The focus of the Strategic Civic Room is for effective dialogue and deliberation as the residents search for solutions to issues that enhance the overall quality of life of their neighborhood.

The technology is simple. Each computer is linked to all those in the room. Each computer has the capability both to search for information, respond to questions with opinions, and vote on alternatives. A central screen allows all those present to watch results as individuals anonymously provide opinions and information. The Project Coordinator will utilize a modified Delphi technique to evolve a shared vision for the common good of the neighborhood.

## Using Direct Consensus Democracy to Set an Annual Community Agenda

All interested residents will participate in an annual process in January of each year to identify key issues and concerns. The DCD Project Coordinator will be responsible for the facilitation of the annual process. The following steps will be utilized:

Phase One: the survey phase.

- 1) All residents will answer a questionnaire developed by the Project Coordinator in conjunction with the elected council ( second Tuesday in January ).
- 2) The results will be posted on the neighborhood DCD Web Site immediately to include a rank order of the issues.
- 3) All interested residents will sign up for one of the issues. These residents will become potential "strategy team" members.

Phase Two: the appropriate knowledge phase.

- 1) The neighborhood council will facilitate a discussion of how many of the issues to take on for the year. This will be done in the Strategic Civic Room in conjunction with those in attendance. The Project Coordinator will provide information requested. The LAN technology will be utilized to build a consensus on the number of appropriate issues.
- 2) Once the number of issues have been selected, the results of this deliberation will be put on the entire electronic network for comment.
- 3) Any final adjustment will be made by the end of January.
- 4) Strategy Teams will be formed by interest to search for appropriate information.

- 5) The issues will be addressed as originally identified in priority. No more than two issues will be actively addressed for dialogue and deliberation at any one time. The residents can change the priorities as a result of bimonthly updates on the second Tuesday of every other month.
- 6) For every key issue a minimum of three (weekly or biweekly) generative dialogue sessions will be held in the Strategic Civic Room with those who have signed up to be a part of the strategy team. All residents will have the capability to watch the proceedings as a result of the public TV channel available to each home in the neighborhood. The objective of these sessions is to identify and understand the cross impact of factors important to the issue. At all times the Project Coordinator will integrate future trends of direct and indirect importance to the issue so that the dialogue can always lead to creative and generative solutions (thus the term generative dialogue).
- 7) After each generative dialogue session, the results will be framed and provided to all the residents for their information and comments. All comments will be integrated into the next dialogue in appropriate ways.
- 8) Once all the factors have been identified, and the impact of future trends have been discussed, a final report of the strategic information phase of DCD will be issued.

Phase Three: the strategic decision phase.

- 1) All members of the strategy team will meet in the Strategic Civic Room to begin to develop at least two (maximum of three) alternative ways to resolve the issue.
- 2) At all times the COTF maxim for the common good in the 21st century will be utilized as a foundation principle for generative dialogue and deliberation - "at all times I will

try to find appropriate truth in your comment, concern, or suggestion, and, thus, help make your point a part of the solution which will be to the common good of the neighborhood."

- 3) The Project Coordinator will work with each strategic team to insure that they are: a) working with diverse and broad information, b) are not closed in their thinking , and c) understand the impact of trends appropriate to the issue(s) under consideration.
- 4) Within four weeks an interim report will be provided outlining the alternative ideas that have been developed for each issue. This information will be sent to all the residents for their comments. The strategic team will make appropriate changes trying to incorporate the responses from the residents.
- 5) No later than eight weeks from the start of Phase III, two or more final alternative plans will be provided electronically for review. A final deliberative session will be held at the Strategic Civic Room for those interested. A date will be set at that session will be used for the final electronic voting to select a plan.

#### Issue Oriented Process

When an issue is important enough to be brought up for community consideration during the year, the following procedure is to be used:

- 1) Contact the DCD Project Coordinator for presentation before the Neighborhood Council.
- 2) Once approved for consideration, it will be determined whether the time frame within which consideration is to be given is classified near term or emergency. If the issue is an

emergency, and there is no time for consensus. The Neighborhood Council will decide on a strategy and present it on the DCD Electronic Network for final comment. Any input is then made immediately by the Council and a decision is made. If defined as a near term issue, the Council, in conjunction with the Project Coordinator, decides when to schedule the issue into the normal Phase II and Phase III processes of DCD.

#### Role of the Project Coordinator

The Project Coordinator will be responsible for the following task related to the Direct Consensus Democracy Process in Amelia Park:

- 1) A bi-weekly orientation held on the second and fourth Tuesdays of every month to help new residents learn how to participate in and utilize the Direct Consensus Democracy Process.
- 2) Research issues and be the clearinghouse for all data available to provide diverse information from all points of view to the residents.
- 3) Maintain a historical and real-time data base of information for issues of concern to the residents.
- 4) Be available at certain designated hours to answer questions from any resident.
- 5) Update the DCD Handbook as required.
- 6) Facilitate the development of the DCD questionnaires to be utilized by the electronic network.
- 7) Provide staffing for the neighborhood representatives.
- 8) Facilitate the "strategy civic room" sessions.

- 9) Prepare packets for the "strategy teams."
- 10) Facilitate the "strategy teams."
- 11) Facilitate all electronic voting, authenticating outcomes within one hour.
- 12) Monitor all "feedback data" and insure that information is properly utilized by all "strategy teams."
- 13) Utilize a modified Delphi technique to facilitate the consensus decision making process.

#### How to Access the Local Area Network

Each home computer will have software which allows direct access to the DCD Local Area Network. Each residence will have identification and access personal codes.

Step 1 - Turn on the computer

Step 2 - Click on the Neighborhood Icon

Step 3 - Once the Neighborhood Web Page appears, click on the DCD menu item

#### How to Access Information

Choose the appropriate category from the menu:

- . Neighborhood historical data base
- . Issue information
- . Questionnaires
- . Voting
  - . Identification of annual issues of concern
  - . Special strategies
- . Public access of strategic civic room dialogue
- . Email
- . Access the Internet

## How to Answer Questionnaires

Once you click on the menu item "Questionnaires," the first Icon "Neighborhood Together" is to be used only during the January agenda setting process.

- . When this is to be utilized, click on Neighborhood Together and wait until the "agenda questionnaire" heading appears. Fill out the questionnaire as instructed. There is no limit to the number of issues/concerns that may be posted in the open-ended part of the questionnaire.
- . Answer the specific questions by level of importance, with five being very important and one being least important.
- . If a key concern is covered by the specific questions, please don't enter it in the open-ended segment of the questionnaire.
- . All specific concerns identified for ranking in closed-ended questions have been identified by your elected representatives as a result of dialogue with neighborhood residents.

The second icon, "we must act now" is used to work with the Project Coordinator, elected representatives and strategy teams when feed back is needed to help develop a consensus on some specific issue that needs immediate attention.

- . Respond to each question that appears:
  - . Give written comments when points of view are requested.
  - . Click on number(s) when a strategy team provides alternative approaches for your consideration.

## How to Vote on Issues

Click on "vote" Icon to provide specific issues. One or more issues will appear. Click on the issue of interest. In each case,

strategy teams will have provided two or three alternatives for consideration with icon links to backup material which provides data, interim input from citizens to build a consensus, reasons specific actions are suggested, a budget required, and how resources will be utilized to follow through on each strategy.

Once you have read all back-up information and have now made your decision, enter your residence identification code and the issue identification code and the alternative strategy number for your "vote."

Once your vote is recorded for that issue, no other vote will be accepted. Only a call to the Project Coordinator by the designated team leader of the household can unlock any issue to be able to change the vote. This must be done within fifteen minutes of the original vote if all residents are voting at a prescribed time.

#### How to Respond to Questions

All neighborhood residents should check their email at least once every other day. When the Project Coordinator, any resident, representative body, or any strategy team wants to ask all residents their opinion, an email message will appear with one of two headings:

- 1) The message "issue input needed" means that your comment is desired to help understand an issue or to help develop alternative approaches.
- 2) The second message "feedback" asks for you to respond to specific ideas that are in the process of evolving.

Once you click on the Icon "questions" on the neighborhood Web Page, select which type of question is appropriate. Then click on the menu item and give your input based on the instructions and questions asked.

## Utilizing the Strategic Civic Room

The Neighborhood Strategic Civic Room is located at \_\_\_\_\_. This room has been designed to be "citizen friendly." Not only is the room designed to allow interested residents to face each other for generative dialogue, but the room also provides "decision desks" which allow residents to use real-time technology to access information and input opinions as the dialogue evolves.

The Strategic Civic Room will be utilized in two ways:

- 1) To allow interested citizens to come together to talk about an issue of interest during the "appropriate knowledge" phase of the annual DCD Process.
- 2) To discuss alternatives developed by strategy teams prior to voting on any issue identified as important by Amelia Park residents or the representative council.

### Specific Instructions for Use of the Strategic Civic Room

- 1) Each resident must sign up to be involved with any generative dialogue session. This is done by clicking on the Civic Room Icon and entering the personal identification code. All those who sign up for a specific session will be participants ( up to the capacity of the room ). Those late in signing up can watch the session from home over the Neighborhood's Local Area Network Videocam.
- 2) When you enter the civic room, go to a decision desk and enter your personal code in the computer. Make sure that your name appears on the desk computer and the overhead screen.
- 3) You will be asked by the Project Coordinator if you have read the information provided for the issue on the Web Page. Only those who have read the information will be allowed to be involved in the generative dialogue session. The others can stay and listen or may leave.

The Project Coordinator will facilitate the session to include:

- a) Defining key factors about the issue.
- b) Identifying trends which will impact the issue.
- c) Discussion of ideas important to the issue.

During each phase of the dialogue, the Project Coordinator will switch between face to face conversation and the use of the Local Area Network computer technology. When appropriate, the Project Coordinator will ask those participating to provide ideas and/or respond to ideas provided from other sources. As the session progresses, it is expected that a framework of factors, concepts, strategies and/or actions will emerge. At the end of the session, those present, and those watching from home, will vote on a final "session product." This information will then be placed on the Neighborhood Local Area Network for comment within two days from other residents who did not participate with the generative dialogue process in the Civic Room.

Once the alternative strategies have been designed, a date will be set for all residents to vote for the strategy which they think most appropriate.

### Conclusion

The Knowledge Democracy Center is dedicated to community research and development which will insure a rebirth of vitality to our democratic process. It is our opinion that a hybrid system integrating the best of representative democracy and the best of direct democracy will be necessary. Undergirded by the need for learning at all times to resolve increasingly complex issues, residents in local neighborhoods will be able to utilize the concepts of Knowledge Democracy and the methods of DCD to insure continued strength of our democracy and a return to the passion for the common good.