

# How To Celebrate The Bicentennial

*Town Meeting '76 is an imaginative program designed to engage some 5,000 American communities in one-day Bicentennial Era forums.*

## TOWN MEETING

# 76

## How One Community Came Alive

Town Meeting '76 was developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA), a not-for-profit research, demonstration, and training group concerned with the human factor in world development. The program was recently awarded recognition by the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration and the Minnesota American Revolution Bicentennial Commission.

The Town Meeting '76 format was tested for feasibility in 39 communities across the nation on a single day, June 8, 1974. The Whittier neighborhood in Minneapolis was one of them — its story appears below. In each case, the meetings were sponsored locally by community and municipal organizations and agencies. Over 3,000 citizens participated. A cross section of each community's population was represented.

The response to this experiment exceeded all serious expectations. The excitement generated in each of the 39 Town Meetings indicated that local citizens have a strong desire to voice their concerns where they feel their ideas can make a difference. Follow-up efforts indicate that



Town Meeting '76 — at first blush it may look like a hackneyed idea punched up, but it takes only 14 seconds to realize that this new format for citizen participation is a vital, viable vehicle whose time has come. Whittier, a neighborhood in South Minneapolis, tried it and found that it fit like a custom made suit.

### Whittier's Character

Whittier is a community that sports opulent mansions and plush tree lined streets that speak eloquently of its luxurious past. Today many of these homes house funeral parlors, apartments, half-way houses and small businesses. They sit side by side with high rise senior citizen complexes, large modern apartment buildings and gasoline stations.

In this community of 15,000 you find wealth and welfare; blue collar and executive; white, black and red, with a rich

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the Town Meeting catalyzed a significant sense of responsibility, as reflected in new local initiatives.

Nationwide Town Meetings have been held in urban neighborhoods of major cities (such as Minneapolis; Washington, D.C.; Chicago; Newark; Philadelphia; Kansas City; San Francisco as well as in rural communities (including Ada, Oklahoma; Lacey, Washington; Clarksburg, West Virginia; Bethel, Alaska; Fayette County, Ohio). Town Meeting formats identical to that used in the United States have also been used across Canada. The ICA has been invited by officials in Australia, the Phillipines and Korea to bring the same format to their countries, indicating its universal applicability.

### Minnesota's Participation

ICA has agreed to make available 90 Town Meetings in urban neighborhoods and rural communities across Minnesota. Some Minnesota communities have experienced or have already begun plans for Town Meeting '76. Farsighted officials of these communities have perceived the need for the kind of constructive citizen

mix of ethnic backgrounds; established residential and an ever-growing number of apartment dwellers and group home services; a constant flow of students, working singles and retired citizens; and a past of wealth and stability and a present with the lowest per-capita income for Minneapolis and highest transiency and crime rate.

Whittier's early beginnings are generously sprinkled with notable names like senator W. P. Washburn, George Brackett, Dorilus Morrison, Charles Pillsbury, George H. Christian, R. I. Mendenhall - people who carved out this community and its identity. Yet, in recent years, Whittier had become the "hole in the doughnut" of Minneapolis. Its historic identity was no longer relevant to the present residents and was too narrow to honor gifts of the neighborhood's wide diversity.

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participation which results from Town Meeting '76. The utility of this vehicle for discerning the issues and concerns of the people and of obtaining local input for community solutions to community concerns has been shown to be invaluable. Community officials have made use of the results to clarify current issues and to determine the nature of the community's vision for its own future. An additional benefit has been the citizen-established tactics, or practical steps and priorities of accomplishing the stated goals for their future.

### The Town Meeting Format

The agenda of the one-day Town Meeting focuses on morning and afternoon workshop sessions. The meeting opens at 9:00 a.m. with a community welcome and closes at 5:00 p.m. with a general reporting session. The format has been designed so that it can be used in all 5,000 communities, providing a common basis for comparing and evaluating the results, yet allowing emphasis upon points of local interest and uniqueness. While the activities of the day are structured, the celebrative atmosphere is informal.



Once again Whittier was faced with the challenge of carving out its future, but now the task included such issues as zoning, comprehensive design, neighborhood communication and cooperation, rehabilitation of housing, poor distribution of goods and services and age stratifications, all of which demanded broad-based citizen participation in the decision-making process.

### Whittier's Town Meeting

On June 8, 1974, this community held a Town Meeting, inviting local citizens from all over the community to come together. Provided with a way to get at common concerns, to look at the past, present and future of Whittier, to talk about problems as challenges, and begin the process of long range planning, the people that met that day agreed on three central directions for the future:

*"All the great civilizations had one thing in common, a positive image of the future infusing the present with purpose and expectation."*

**ROBERT BUNDY**

Town Meeting '76 is not a complaint session. Its focus is directed toward creative proposals for future directions by building upon the gifts and strengths of the community. These proposals are arrived at through innovative think-tank processes. The morning session is an analysis of the underlying challenges facing our nation and the community. The afternoon session is the writing of practical proposals for meeting those challenges. A short talk sets the stage for each workshop and a festive noon-time luncheon interlude marks the transition from the present to the future with songs and local entertainment.

The participants of each Town Meeting create a document which consists of 15 or 20 defined challenges and resolved proposals. They also create a story, a song and a graphic symbol that relates



1. Building community identity and responsibility;
2. Preserving the community's architectural heritage and natural beauty; and
3. Beginning a community organization to join people together in work on continuing community needs.

#### **The Whittier Community Organization**

On Wednesday following the Town Meeting, 30 Whittier residents met to evaluate the Town Meeting challenges and proposals. From that meeting and the weekly meetings that continued thereafter, a core group evolved which saw its purpose as being to implement the new vision of Whittier to demonstrate to the whole city how local residents can creatively participate in decisions which affect the community's future.

One of the major challenges to be directly addressed in the year since that

their community to the nation's future. This document is reproduced during the day and distributed at the final session.

ICA will act as a research and program consultant in the project — helping sponsoring groups by producing materials, providing operational designs, training local leadership, and participating in the major task of summarizing the resulting proposals for publication.

Although the specific results of the pilot Town Meetings have varied from community to community, three dominant themes seem to emerge:

1. Grassroots citizens recover a deep sense of confidence in the value of their own insights and intuitions;
2. People are astounded to discover how broadly their concerns are shared by others;
3. There is a realization with some astonishment, that the proposals form a practical community plan which the creators have a particular responsibility to carry out.

#### **Creating the Future**

The implications arising from the pilot

first Town Meeting was the recovery of the identity of Whittier as a distinct neighborhood in South Minneapolis. A series of events planned by the core group (now called the Whittier Community Organization) rekindled this community identity. The events included "Sunday in Whittier", a full day community celebration on September 8, 1974, in Fair Oaks Park which involved 3,000 citizens in a festive celebration of Whittier's past, present and future; a "Whittier Clean Up Day" in November; "Whittier in Harmony," a community sing in December; "Whittier's Young at Heart", a Valentine's ball for community elders in February, and a second Town Meeting held at historic Whittier school in March.

Seeing the community as a definable, historic and viable neighborhood has been the result witnessed by Whittier citizens. This new vision brought new demands and

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Town Meetings are numerous. Some mentioned are use of the Town Meeting format as a regular vehicle for citizen participation in community decision making, expanded and more effective citizen participation in community events and programs, coordination of service clubs and public and private agencies to avoid duplication and to allow concentration of services on the critical community needs; community problems being solved from within by the use of community resources, without waiting for or depending upon outside experts.

As in Whittier, communities across the country have found Town Meeting '76 to be useful in uncovering the community's previously untapped human resources.

Because of a long history of pioneering in citizen involvement, Minnesota is particularly well suited to the Town Meeting program. The Minneapolis Office of the Institute of Cultural Affairs has found citizens and public and private service groups receptive to sponsoring a day for their community. Its futuric emphasis has led the Horizons Panel of the Minnesota

American Revolution Bicentennial Commission to recommend it to the full commission, where it has been unanimously endorsed with a grant to provide partial funding for the first 41 meetings. Public endorsements include the Minnesota-Dakota District of Kiwanis, the League of Women Voters of Minnesota; the Minnesota Department of Economic Development; the Governor's Office of Economic Opportunity. Interest and encouragement have also been expressed by staff of such organizations as Minnesota Commission for the Future, the Minnesota Association of Commerce and Industry, the Minnesota Bankers Association, and the Minnesota Agricultural Extension Service. Nationally, in addition to adoption by the official national body, Kiwanis International has endorsed the day-long construct as a meaningful way for citizens to participate in the Bicentennial Celebration.

A common response to Town Meeting '76 is "Any town can do this... and needs to!" "What a good way to celebrate our 200th birthday." ■



a new dimension for the community organization. Time had come for a plan of concrete, effective structural care for community residents on a comprehensive basis. This necessarily meant bridging gaps between citizens, political representatives, local businessmen and all existing social programs and agencies. The creation of a long-range plan to build these

bridges delineated 15 programs to be initiated with three implemented each year. Excitement began to build as plans were proposed for "Whittier University", which could offer accredited courses in subjects directly applicable in the home, business or community. Other proposals include block clubs, a community center, annual community celebrations and a community communications network.

The transformation which has occurred in Whittier was initiated by an event — the Town Meeting held on June 8, 1974. The format presented local citizens with a vehicle to get beyond immediate concerns to the underlying root issues and challenges facing the community. The basis of this transformation was the experience of individual citizens who began to see themselves as creative participants, rather than observers, in deciding the future of their community. ■

*"We hold this annual celebration to remind ourselves of all the good done in the process of time, of how it was done and who did it and how we are historically connected with it. And we go from these meetings in better humor with ourselves — we feel more attached to the one to the other and more firmly bound to the country we inhabit."*

ABRAHAM LINCOLN