



Health of Civic Layers

Some layers of civic life are healthy and robust while others are in decline, squeezed out by community development patterns, the increased pace of life, social fears and isolation. Here are a couple of points to keep in mind when seeking to understand the health of civic layers.

1. There can be weaknesses within a layer.

For instance, civic spaces may be few, offering you limited ways to tap into the civic life of an area or topic.

2. There can be gaps in between layers.

The connection between different civic layers is important, because in a healthy civic life, information and insights move from one layer to another, which is how a community informs itself and makes decisions. In a less healthy civic life, the lack of connections between layers will make it more difficult for you to follow how a public concern develops, how people speak about and relate to the concern, and how you can provide coverage that draws on people's sense of context.

What it means when civic layers are weak:

- Keep digging deeper to discover more civic spaces, such as someone's home or backyard.
- Find other ways to bring people together for conversations — by asking a civic or faith-based group to invite people to a meeting, or by asking someone to invite neighbors in for coffee.
- Identify when gaps exist in between civic layers in an area and listen for what it means. Usually when gaps exist, issues, concerns and facts can lose their meaning and relevance as they move from one layer to the next.

For example, people want their schools to provide a sound and safe learning environment. The school board and superintendent offer a plan that, *on the surface*, doesn't seem to address those concerns. In what ways does it, if at all? How can you approach a story in ways that help people see connections — rather than write about the plan's missing pieces or how some in the community "slam" the plan?