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Focus on: Citizens and Public Choice
"We've created an initiative, called Neighbor to Neighbor, with an audacious goal: holding a solutions-oriented conversation in nearly every neighborhood, village, township, and city in the region."

"Imagine Cincinnati as a model city for solving racial problems. You can help make it a reality. Find out how."

With that simple statement, The Cincinnati Enquirer and 110 cosponsors invited the citizens of Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky to come together "Neighbor to Neighbor" in a series of dialogues entitled "Community Conversations on Race: What Should We Do?"

"We've created an initiative, called Neighbor to Neighbor, with an audacious goal: holding a solutions-oriented conversation in nearly every neighborhood, village, township, and city in the region," Enquirer Managing Editor Rosemary Goudreau wrote in a column published October 8, 2001.

The newspaper decided to sponsor the forums following the riots in Cincinnati in the spring of 2001. The initiative included facilitator training by Dave Patton of The Ohio State University's Civic Life Institute and Chip Harrod of the National Conference for Community and Justice in Cincinnati. With help from the Kettering Foundation and the National Issues Forums, the initiative created a framework for talking about race.

From mid-November 2001 through mid-March 2002, Neighbor to Neighbor had held or planned 163 conversations in 108 communities — and nearly half the groups planned to meet again to keep the conversation going.

After each conversation, facilitators posted summaries on the initiative's Web site (http://cincinnati.com/neighbors) so that every citizen in the region with access to the Internet could keep abreast of how the conversations were progressing.

"We find answers when we talk," reads the Web site's homepage. "When it comes to improving race relations," it reports, "this is what your neighbors are saying:

- "Greater Cincinnati would be a lot better off if everyone just treated everyone else the same — as Americans, not as whites or blacks.
- "No, things would be better if everyone honored each other's differences — primarily their race."

Beyond sharing these divergent frames, the Neighbor to Neighbor Web site also reports:

- "People from Forest Park and Springfield and Colerain townships are investigating ways their churches can bring diverse people together.
- "Neighbors in Kenton County want public schools to enlist excellent students as role models to pair with poor-performing students.
- "People from around Hyde Park want to meet more often with police officers to develop better relations.
- "People in Pleasant Ridge may start a book club to discuss topics of racism."

The Cincinnati initiative is perhaps the most sweeping example of a newspaper engaging in community deliberation in consultation with the Kettering Foundation (KF) and the National Issues Forums. But it is not the only example. The Charleston Gazette has published issue frameworks developed by the West Virginia Center for Civic Life, and the Messenger-Inquirer has been a lead sponsor of community deliberations in
At least 300 people have volunteered to help lead or host Neighbor to Neighbor conversations in the Cincinnati area. Some of them are shown above.

In Poughkeepsie, The Poughkeepsie Journal in New York has partnered with Dutchess Community College to sponsor a series of National Issues Forums, most recently on how the community should respond to terrorism. In addition, the Times of Northwest Indiana in Hammond is working with a half-dozen area colleges and universities to develop deliberative forums, starting with a forum on terrorism cosponsored with Valparaiso University in November 2001.

Some of these initiatives have grown out of the Kettering Foundation's Community-Media Workshops. Others have been initiated by a newspaper or a community group that then turns to KF or NIF for information about the effective use of deliberation in a community setting.

It makes sense for the foundation to work with news organizations in its study of what helps democracy work as it should — particularly with regard to deliberation. Deliberation occurs in the open — within and among political, governmental, economic, and civic associations and institutions. These bodies are linked to the larger citizenry largely through the news media that pay attention to their work. Citizens' sense of the vitality of deliberative democracy and public life can be significantly influenced by the way news media frame and depict these aspects of community life. And citizens' sense of the efficacy of their own engagement with each other and with community organizations also can be significantly influenced by how the news media frame and depict issues for public deliberation.

Through the Project on Public Life and the Press, KF has learned that journalists who learn to appreciate the public's capacity to deliberate change the way they frame and depict public life in their reporting. Among these journalists, coverage of some traditional topics, such as elections, has taken on a more deliberative character as they frame candidates' positions as alternative approaches to public issues rather than as merely appeals to different constituencies. This suggests that news organizations are worth further study and collaborative research.

Citizens' sense of the vitality of deliberative democracy and public life can be significantly influenced by the way news media frame and depict these aspects of community life.
A column (January 13, 2002) by Bob Ashley, editor of the Messenger-Inquirer in Owensboro, Kentucky, is an example of that paper's efforts to foster public deliberation on important community issues.

**Public dialogue important to weigh pros, cons of casino gambling**

When John Froehlich and Dan Edelschick of Downtown Owensboro first pitched the idea of a forum on casino gambling to me, I was darkly skeptical.

Whatever its merits, I observed, the idea has no traction. Nearly two years of sporadic discussion seemed not to have fired up people on either side of the issue...

We conducted a roundtable discussion with the editorial board and a dozen folks with interest in this issue a few months ago and received little reaction to the report of that discussion...

Because any good community newspaper's role is to churn up some real dialogue on civic issues — and because John and Dan were resolute — I figured, what the heck, let's give it a try. The Messenger-Inquirer would be glad to co-sponsor the discussion, and I'd lend some time to moderate it.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

After Tuesday evening, I'm about to add my initial skepticism to the ever-longer list of examples that I'm lousy at foreseeing the future. That's why I don't go to the track.

On a chilly weeknight in drizzy, post-holiday January, about 200 people came out to listen — really listen — to three representatives of towns with casino gambling.

You read a good summation in Keith Lawrence's story on Wednesday of what was said. The panelists were articulate, engaged and sometimes witty. The audience was polite, attentive and occasionally feisty.

All of those are good things.

I'm not here to argue for or against casino gambling. The paper has yet to take a position on it and I, like my colleagues, am weighing pros and cons.

Tuesday night's session indicated that so are many, perhaps most, of you.

I'd like to think that Tuesday's discussion demonstrated that this community is interested, ready and even eager for a dialogue on the question.

That is what we need.

This is not an easy issue. The arguments for economic growth are strong. On the other hand, the concerns that many people have on the practical downsides are valid. What will happen to crime, to traffic, to civic cohesiveness? Is the casino boom that many towns see a flash in the pan, doomed to go away later or, worse, sooner? This community has bet its future on whiskey-distilling, wagon-making, vacuum-tube manufacture. They've been short-term booms that faded into nothing.

Full, honest and robust discussion will hammer out how best to weigh those pros and cons.

The harder part of the issue — one on which middle ground may be especially elusive — also was apparent Tuesday night.

For many good people, this is not a question of economics. It's not a debate over whether infrastructure improvements would be outweighed by congestion, about whether jobs created in one sector would outweigh jobs wiped out, or businesses harmed, in another.

For many, this is a question of morality. Is gambling simply wrong, a violation of community standards and basic moral precepts?

Others might argue that it most certainly is not — that there is no moral imperative against something that already is sanctioned in this state at the horse track, the convenience store lottery-ticket counter, the church bingo hall.

And still others might argue that it's a personal choice.

But that doesn't change the fact that many people think it's very wrong.

An incredibly difficult — and important — community debate should lie ahead.

Maybe it's moot, at least in the near term. The legislature probably isn't going to open this door.

But lots of things can happen in the frenzy of Frankfort — especially in a year when revenue shortfalls and escalating expectations for expenditures put a tremendous squeeze on the treasury.

Even if there's no action this year, the tide may move in that direction.

And it's important to know where we as a community stand on this.

I think healthy dialogue took a big step forward Tuesday. We, and others, will be looking for ways to keep it going.

Whether it does, is largely up to you.

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Because news organizations reflect and contribute to public discourse, they can be a platform for infusing public discourse with a more deliberative quality. They serve as gatekeepers to information and, in a sense, to public participation. The gates to civic participation open and close in accordance with the degree to which citizens see public life framed as a life of possibility or the realm of knavery and tomfoolery. News media that frame public life as a realm in which citizen participation matters encourage such participation. They can help increase public acting in their communities.

As one of the few boundary-spanning institutions in any community, news organizations have incredible reach, both geographic and demographic. They can reach the widest array of citizens and organizations with examples of deliberative democracy at work and with portrayals of public life that encourage participation.

News organizations also are committed to public service and sense that they need to strengthen their connection to citizens and communities. Several are experimenting with ways to act more publicly and to relate more effectively to the public sphere. Within the world of journalism and journalism education, there are many leaders and innovators who can be strong partners in improving how public life is framed.

But there are also some drawbacks to working with news organizations. Given their professional cultures, news organizations are internally focused and often are not open to learning new practices and theories from people outside of journalism. They can be, paradoxically, addicted to the novel and stuck in the past. Their attention constantly shifts to the new, even as their professional dialogue rehashes many of the same issues in the same ways as it has for the past decade.

News organizations are also business organizations, and they are preoccupied with the challenges of economic success. Journalists may fall victim to the temptation to recruit citizens to their cause as a counterweight to corporate interests they perceive to be inimical to journalistic interests. If so, journalistic interests, rather than civic interests, would remain the focus of their endeavors. News organizations are so implicated in the way public life is functioning now that they may have a particularly hard time reaching escape velocity for a new, more civic orbit. Meanwhile, public trust in news organizations continues to rise and fall, which may be a barrier to citizens engaging with each other through news organizations’ work.

But The Cincinnati Enquirer’s collaborative effort to foster conversations about race suggests the scale and sweep that news organizations can bring to community deliberation. And that is a process worth learning more about.

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