



Common Cause

Rhode Island

# BLUEPRINT *for a* → GREAT DEMOCRACY

Reimagining Public Meetings

Sunday, November 29  
7:00-8:15 p.m.

“Official public meetings like town halls, city council meetings, and congressional hearings are an abiding and familiar format for representatives to engage with their constituents in-between election cycles. **We can begin by redesigning them to be more participatory: make them reach beyond the organized, loud, or well-resourced voices of the few, and make them more productive**, so that all interactions are well-informed, substantive, and direct.”

[Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century](#)  
COMMISSION ON THE PRACTICE OF DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

# Public meetings matter

When Common Cause's Blueprint for a Great Democracy conference went virtual in 2020, we in Rhode Island decided to take the opportunity to convene conversations on two timely topics. Public meetings and elections are both crucial to civic engagement, and both have been impacted dramatically by COVID-19. Recognizing that progress begins with ourselves, we committed to making the discussions as robust as possible and fully sharing out what we heard. This document is a compilation of the first session, ***Reimagining Public Meetings***.

On Sunday, November 29, 2020, we were joined by 98 friends and neighbors for an exploration on how we can improve public meetings. Our speakers offered honest and complete assessments of what's working...and what's not. The crowd was lively, offering thoughtful feedback and questions. Following the event, three community leaders offered thought-provoking responses, provided here. Also in this document, you'll find audience survey results, links to the live recordings, and additional resources to consider.

Special thanks to our speakers Stephanie Gonzalez, Steph Machado, David Petrarca, Brent Runyon, and Ramona Santos Torres for setting the tone about why public meetings matter and bringing forth so many real-life examples. Our gratitude goes to our community respondents Christina Bevilacqua, Liza Burkin, and Shawn Selleck for taking a step back for higher-level reflections. And for those of you who spent your Sunday evening with us, thank you for your commitment to our democracy.

Public meetings are one important interface between *we the people* and our government. They are an important tool in the toolbox of civic engagement, and it is clear, from what we heard from you and from our own experience, that they can be far better. COVID-19 has shined a light on this struggle, and also made it obvious that we are capable of change. At Common Cause Rhode Island, we are committed to working with you to improve the laws that govern our public meetings and to promoting the kind of civic engagement that makes government work for all.

In gratitude,

John Marion  
Executive Director  
Common Cause Rhode Island

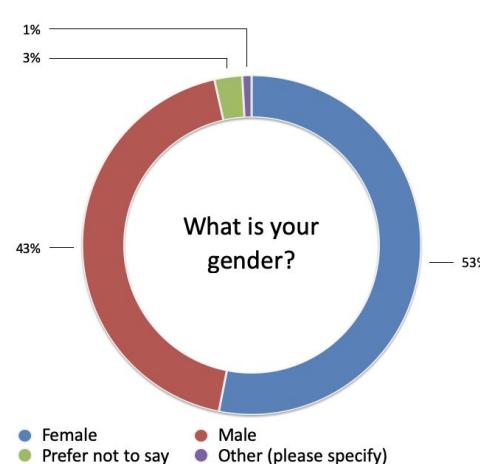
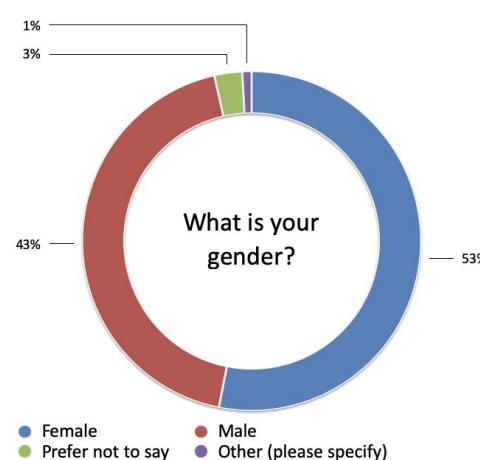
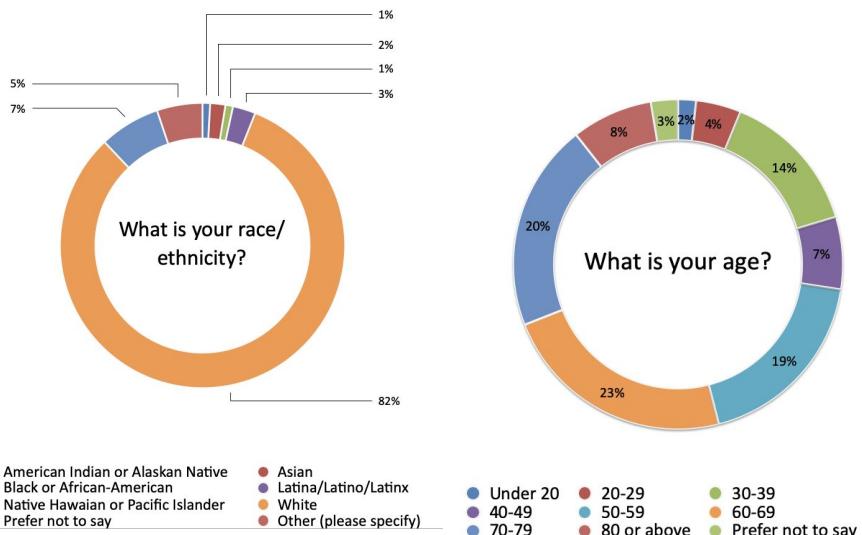
Jessica David  
Blueprint Moderator



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As an extension of the Blueprint for a Great Democracy convenings, Common Cause Rhode Island conducted a survey of people who signed up for the online session. The results presented in the next few pages reflect the 117 responses.

The survey offers interesting and important insights and creative suggestions. One note: The responses should be interpreted in light of the demographics of the respondents, as the participants clearly do not reflect the diversity of Rhode Island's population.



**19.5%**

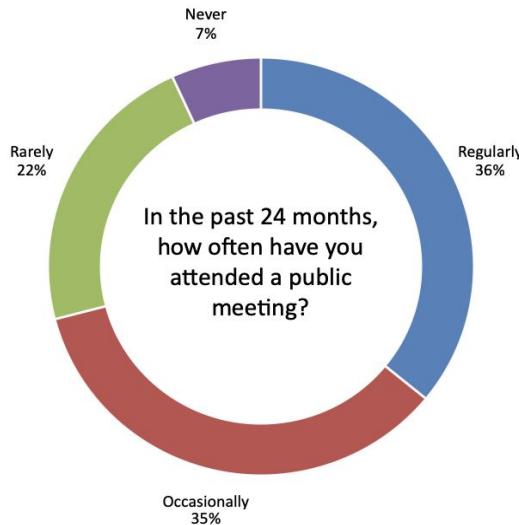
Respondents are elected or appointed officials

**22.1%**

were previously elected or appointed officials

When you think about “public meetings” what are the first three words that come to mind?





**69.2%**  
participated virtually

**64.1%**  
participated in-person

**43.8**

say COVID has not changed their practices

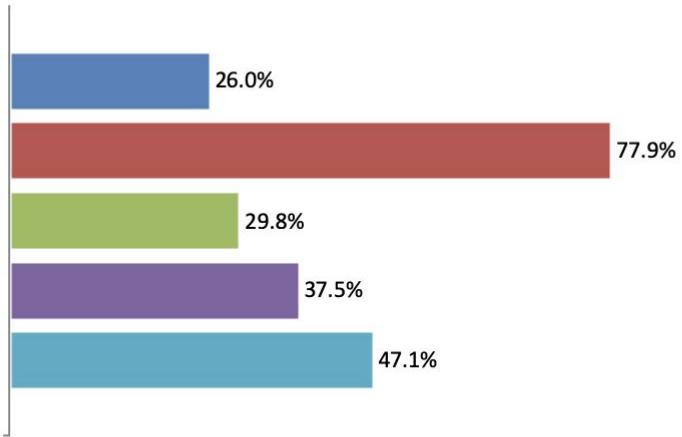
**38.4%**

say they can participate **more** because of COVID

**17.9%**

say they can participate **less** because of COVID

What motivates you to participate in public meetings?

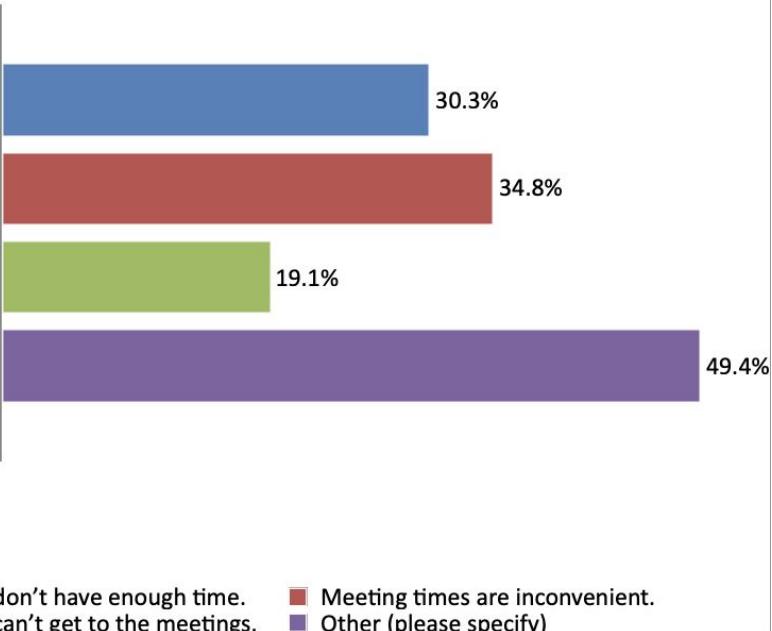


**39.3%**

say they don't participate as  
much as they'd like

- I attend as many meetings as possible of specific entities that I care about.
- I attend public meetings when a specific topic or agenda item is of interest.
- I attend when someone asks me to.
- I consider it my civic duty.
- I like to stay on top of what's happening in my community.

If you wish to participate more, what gets in the way?



**“Other” responses included:**

- Primary care-giver
- Too confusing
- Public meeting fatigue
- Others dominate the conversation
- Agendas and information publicly available with very short window
- Many meetings are usually really poorly run
- often parking close enough is a problem for disabled people like me.
- I miss announcements or aren't sure if agenda items are relevant
- Virtual meetings have limits on the amount of people who can testify. And regularly I have been at the end of the line when public testimony is ended.
- An issue takes months (years) to resolve and tracking that and missing the one significant meeting stymies my efforts to engage.
- Becoming knowledgeable on the topic requires a lot of digging
- Not enough time or space to speak and feel heard.

**83.6%**

say they want to participate  
virtually going forward

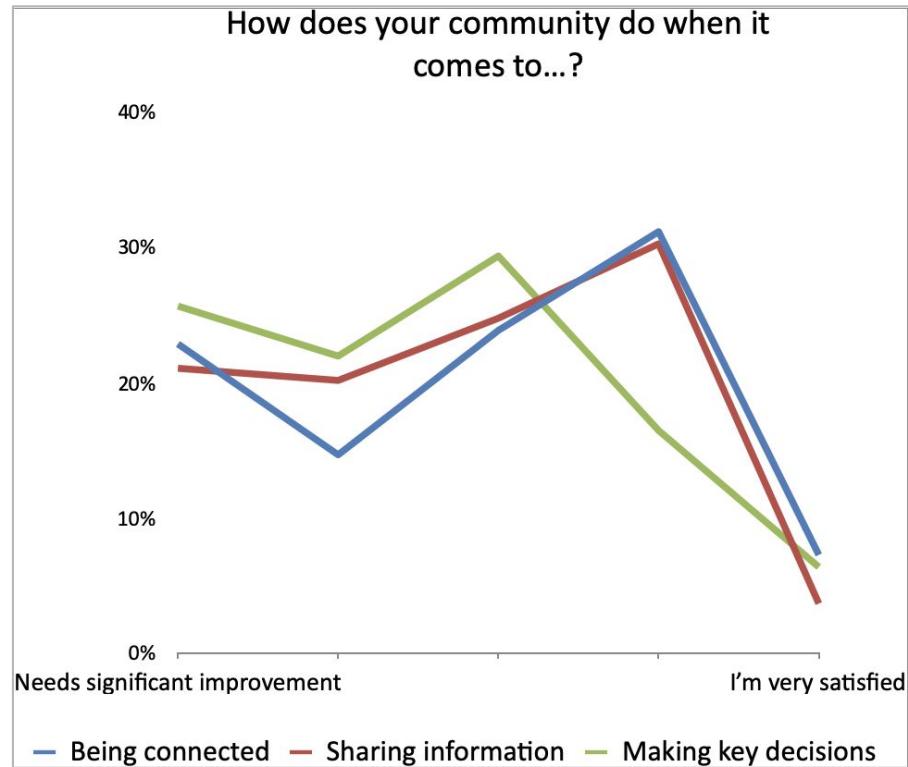
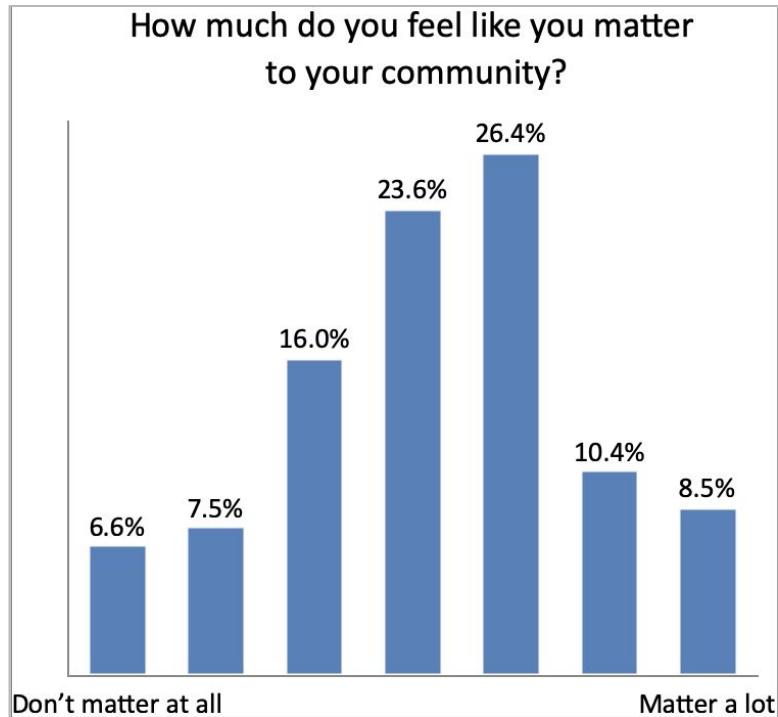
**75.9%**

say they want to participate  
in-person going forward

## Suggestions for improvement include:

- I'd encourage using an online, moderated, message board--similar to the CoUrbanize.com model I was familiar with in Boston, which allowed the public (and officials and proponents) to comment on a project in advance of the public hearing, to engage in (moderated for civility) dialogue, etc. This made it a lot easier for busy people or the less engaged to learn about issues and to make their voices heard. It also allowed an expansion of the public record to include a broader range of participants.
- Boards need to give serious thought as to who they elect Chair . Very often, boards or committees are led by weak Chairpersons, who are not effective at leading meetings. These meetings, which could be concluded in short order frequently last too long.
- I feel like there is intentionality in dragging out the meeting in hopes the public will not comment...officials talking to hear themselves talk, not caring about the public's voice at all. There should be one five min break every 90 minutes so people can use the bathroom etc. There should not be public comment held off to the end of the meeting - meetings should announce how many are on the attendance list.
- Honestly, better journalism. I wouldn't mind reading coverage, but I'm not going to attend 99% of meetings.
- More business, less Festivus (airing of grievances).
- There should be a way for the public to have more of a direct say and decision making power. So often, the public gets to speak at meetings, but then the decision makers make decisions that seem totally out of line with the public's comments. It's frustrating for people when they spend their time making comments or giving testimony, only to feel like their input really doesn't matter. I've been advocating for a process called Participatory Budgeting (PB), in which the public has real decision making power over public budgets. Through PB, the community brainstorms spending ideas, develops concrete proposals, and then gets to vote to determine how money gets spent. It is used by municipalities, school districts, housing authorities, countries in over 5,000 places around the world. So far Central Falls High School is the first place in RI to do PB, but there are a few pilots that will hopefully happen in RI in 2021.
- Change regular agenda publication requirement for public bodies from 48 hours to 5 business days.
- Zoom and other remote meeting technology has been a game-changer in terms of accessibility to public meetings. I'd like to see it continue alongside in-person meetings. Captions in English and commonly-spoken languages would go even further toward inclusiveness.

[Access all of registrants' suggestions for improvements.](#)





**Stephanie Gonzalez** was born and raised in Central Falls. She is a graduate of Central Falls High School and Boston College. Stephanie has been closely connected to schools in Rhode Island through her role as Chair of the Central Falls School District Board of Trustees, and formerly as Associate Director of Partnerships at Blackstone Valley Prep. She is the co-founder of The Central Falls Alumni Association, Millennial Rhode Island, and Parents Leading for Educational Equity (PLEE). Stephanie is a third year law student at Roger Williams University School of Law. Most importantly, she is mom to Omar Ernesto.



**Steph Machado** is a reporter for WPRI 12, where she is a member of the Target 12 investigative unit and covers politics and the city of Providence. Steph has extensive experience covering public meetings, most recently in Providence where she covers City Council and other public boards. Steph is originally from Massachusetts and is a graduate of Syracuse University. She got her start in journalism in Burlington, Vt., and currently lives in Providence.



**David R. Petrarca, Jr.** is a partner at the law firm of Ruggiero, Brochu & Petrarca. Mr. Petrarca is a solicitor and legal counsel for a variety of municipalities, public utility districts and several municipal fire districts, where he focuses on general governance, Open Meetings Act and Access to Public Records Act compliance, litigation, planning, and land use matters. Prior to private practice, Mr. Petrarca was the judicial law clerk for Newport County. He received his juris doctorate from Roger Williams University School of Law, where he was a published member of the law review. Mr. Petrarca received his Bachelor of Arts in History from Roger Williams University. Away from work, he cherishes his time with his wife Amanda, and three children.

“I believe the purpose of public comment should be for decision makers for people like me in our roles to hear the passion, the energy with which every member of the public who chooses to speak up to share their energy, to share their story.”

“As a reporter, the fact that I can't be there in the room and walk up to an elected official and ask them a question is a problem...It's a lot easier to ignore my phone call or my text than it is to ignore me when I'm standing in front of you.”

“Virtual meetings should stay with us in some fashion.”

"Some of the meetings can go for seven hours or more. To be in a room like that is definitely an experience most people don't want to have."



**Brent Runyon** has been executive director of the Providence Preservation Society since October 2013. Prior to that, he was the Executive Director of Thomasville Landmarks in Georgia. Brent received his Masters in Historic Preservation degree from the University of Georgia. His focus is on community planning, citizen advocacy, housing affordability and traditional building trades training. Brent is currently serving on the boards of the Providence Revolving Fund, the Providence Public Library, Trinity Gateway Historic Improvement Association and the advisory board for Housing Works Rhode Island and the city's Special Committee for the Review of Commemorative Works.

"We definitely need to do a better job advertising these meetings...and how I can participate. How can I provide public comment? How can I do that in my native language where I feel that I have something to contribute?"



**Ramona Santos Torres** has been a parent advocate for over 10 years primarily working with families of students with disabilities within the school system and other systems of care. Ramona is the Executive Director and one of the Co-founders of Parents Leading for Educational Equity (PLEE), a parent-led, grassroots organization with a mission to fight for parent voice in education decision-making, and for access to a high-quality public school option for all children of color. She moved to Providence from Sosua, Dominican Republic sixteen years ago with her oldest daughter, Esther. She is also mother to Rachel, who is attending Classical high school in Providence. Ramona graduated from Rhode Island College in 2018 with a Bachelors in Social Work.

[Access the recording with all of the panelists.](#)



**Christina Bevilacqua** is a cultural curator who uses the arts and humanities to cultivate conversation among diverse audiences in her roles as Programs & Exhibitions Director at Providence Public Library and Conversationalist-in-Residence at Trinity Repertory Company. From 2005 to 2016 she curated programming at the Providence Athenaeum, where in 2006 she founded the Providence Athenaeum Salon. She served on the RI Council for the Humanities board from 2005 to 2008 and from 2017 to 2019. She has been a Community Fellow at Brown University's John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage since 2014, and in July 2018 was a Fellow at the Munson Institute for American Maritime Studies at Mystic Seaport Museum. She earned a BA in Writing and Literature from Bard College and an MA in Social Policy from the University of Chicago.



**Liza Burkin** is the lead organizer of the Providence Streets Coalition. Liza is an urban planner, mobility justice advocate, writer, and gardener. She believes in the power of bicycles, writing letters, having a good breakfast, and talking to strangers.



**Shawn Selleck** was appointed Providence City Clerk in early 2019. In 2013, he implemented the city's first Open Meetings Portal while serving as a consultant to the department he now leads. This March, as the pandemic closed City Hall, his team hosted the Providence City Council's first virtual public meeting. Since then, he has been learning with and supporting colleagues and elected officials across Rhode Island and has shared many iterations of virtual meeting best practices as they've developed. The bulk of his career has been spent managing large technology implementation projects, first globally in the private sector with PricewaterhouseCoopers, IBM and Accenture, then in the public sector within the Office of Digital Excellence for the State of Rhode Island. He holds a master's degree in policy from Duke University and a computer science degree from NC State University. He's an engaged resident of Providence's West End.

“...need for ambitious, sustained investment in expertise, equipment, and training in the use of new platforms and methods for both officials and community members.”

[Christina's response](#)

Public meetings are “imperfect but necessary. They should only be seen as one tool in the toolbox in the process of making change.”

[Liza's response](#)

“Over the next year, I promise to make public meetings in the City of Providence more accessible.”

[Shawn's response](#)

**Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century**

Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship

**A quick guide to Executive Order 20-46 impacting public meetings and public records requests**

Rhode Island Attorney General

**Holding Public Meetings Via Videoconference:**

**Best Practices, Reference Guide, & Implementation Plan for Zoom Enterprise Licenses**

Rhode Island Department of Business Regulation

**Is a Better Community Meeting Possible?**

Casey Berkovitz, The Century Foundation

**The Problem with Public Meetings**

The War on Cars Podcast

Part one and part two

**Guidance for Public Meetings: A summary of recommendations**

Blueprint for a Great Democracy: Reimagining Public Meetings

“The best way to create an equitable, inclusive community engagement process is to think beyond the scope of the traditional in-person community meeting.”

[Is a Better Community Meeting Possible?](#)

Casey Berkovitz, The Century Foundation