DIGITAL INPUT

"CIVIC TECH" COULD CHANGE THE FACE OF PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT.

What if your next public open house were an app? Could it be possible that the days of voting by dot and putting Post-its on maps are over? Chances are that in the not-too-distant future you'll get feedback on your projects not just from people in the room but also from people sitting at home with their tablet computers. "Civic tech," as this sort of virtual involvement is called, is making its way into the public decision process, primarily to try to reach out to the poor, the young, and the poor and young. In a way, this civic tech boom seems to answer the question posed by the *Millennials Civic Health Index* (see page 24), especially given that a new involvement tool in Louisville, Kentucky, will specifically target that group of tech-savvy, government-wary youngsters.

The trick, as with all tech rollouts, is to figure out what works and what doesn't. The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation recently put $9 million in grants into learning exactly that. The recipients—the group Code for America (which calls itself a "Peace Corps for Geeks"), GovLab at New York University, and the TED ideas network—will tackle the civic tech question in different ways. Code for America will expand the reach of one of its already successful programs, like "accelerating" a city's tech by engaging start-up companies working on new digital interface platforms. GovLab will train students to develop and implement specific civic tech solutions. And TED will push ideas into its network of professionals in myriad disciplines and dedicate TED fellows to work on the topic. The MacArthur Foundation is on board to measure and disseminate successes.

"A lot of momentum is happening in this area," says Arthur Burris, the director of policy and special initiatives for the philanthropic collaborative Living Cities. "We want to make sure this momentum is happening intentionally." Which is a good thing. The regular evolution of digital toys, with its attendant extinctions, is generally harmless when the apps are all mainly theoretical. But civic tech will actually inform the ways communities are developed, planned, and transformed. The wrong platform could have long-lasting policy and on-the-ground implications, especially if bad ideas are replicated in city after city.

That's why Living Cities, which counts Knight among its 22 member foundations and financial institutions, is partnering with an actual city—Louisville—to develop and roll out some new technology parallel to a citywide planning process. Living Cities and its software developer partner, OpenPlans, kicked off their involvement in Vision Louisville, the city's 25-year plan, in January by initially determining who needs to be reached by the new tech (poor Millennials, primarily). Right now, the two organizations are working on concepts for the tool, which will be developed in part by the very users it targets. This is called the "lean development model" in software circles. The concept isn't done yet, and Burris (in full public-involvement stance) won't give a hint about it until it's been made official.

Living Cities is simultaneously presenting on the Louisville experiment to its Urban Policy Advisory Group (UPAG), a standing committee of 35 chiefs of staff for mayors of major American cities. A recent webinar introduced the idea of civic tech and talked about some existing projects, such as Data Driven Detroit's efforts to compile that city's vacancy information in one central database, and "civic hackathons" that bring programmers together to try to solve problems through code—computer code, that is. Living Cities will continue to present its progress in Louisville to UPAG through the summer and plans to select another city and adapt the Louisville tool for a second test run.

Will technology replace the open house? Not at the moment, according to Burris: "Technology tools provide an additional channel for input." But, you could easily say, an increasingly important one. ●

LIVING CITIES