

HAVING A VOICE | *An introduction to local civics*
UNIT PLAN PROCEDURES

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INTRODUCTION

When most young people think of government in American democracy, they imagine themselves standing in a polling booth voting for the next town mayor, governor, or president of the United States. As exciting as it might be to cast one's vote in an election, it's important to understand that our individual relationships with government extend well beyond that first Tuesday in November. Over the course of this unit, students will learn that activities that happen at the local government level have a direct impact on their neighborhoods and their daily lives, and that they can personally take a role in shaping their communities. *Having a Voice*, is not necessarily a series of "lessons". It is an opportunity to introduce learners to the processes, protocols and interactions of municipal government and to illustrate that citizens are empowered to play active roles in community decision-making.

One of the often surprising realities for young adults eager to be independent is the fact that the "real world" still operates on rules. American democracy is essentially a set of rules for the population. Every citizen has a voice in our system, but there are protocols for using that voice to enact legal change. This unit explores how one 'follows the rules' locally in order to be heard in the system. It's a process that happens one step at a time and can often feel excruciatingly slow. In that slowness, however, is *fairness*: every citizen is granted an equal opportunity to make his or her case (although the majority of citizens never use it,) decisions are made that favor the best interests of the most people; and community funds and taxpayer dollars are spent responsibly.

This unit will walk learners through the process that begins with an idea and ends up as a *resolution*. In the simplest terms, a resolution made by a municipal government is a formal decision by the city to do something specific. Through a series of *meetings*, presentations, interviews, and public input information is collected and passed along until there is enough detail to make a plan that can be presented to the city council for approval; that plan put to paper is called a resolution. Resolutions are generally put on the agenda of a city council meeting in advance in order to provide time for the public to be informed of the initiatives that the governing body is considering. *Motions* for approval of resolutions are made and can be amended on the floor of the meeting. Amendments need to be voted on separately from actual motions in order to adopt resolutions. Resolutions might be presented in a positive or negative voice; they are usually in favor of something or against it and the governing officials need to be clear on which before they cast their votes. The point of holding community discussion on any big idea is generally to move it eventually to resolution. And this is what we'll do through this unit: take an idea and move it to resolution.

Most *municipalities* in Wisconsin have *commission governments* wherein a small number of elected officials serve as a board, and each of these individuals heads committees responsible for a particular branch of local government such as public safety, city planning, finance, etc. Citizens take a role in government when they communicate with members of their municipal boards, bring ideas to the appropriate committees, participate at city council meetings, or hold local office. This unit will explore all of these opportunities for involvement.

THE SCENARIO

*Anytown, Wisconsin has been informed that it has received a \$5 million **bequest** from the estate of a wealthy citizen, Richard Beerich. However, there is a stipulation in the bequest that the money must be used to create “a gathering place for the community.” A hiking group would like to see the development of a public park on some existing municipal green space, and a coalition of youth service organizations would like to see the revitalization of a vacant old school building as a community youth center.*

While there are many *civic* issues worthy of study, we’ve chosen to focus on one that might interest a cross-section of the citizenry. The scenario includes issues surrounding land use and maintenance; income and property taxes; public utilities and safety services - all fairly typical of municipal projects. Students will be asked to work with and analyze maps, budgets and data just as elected officials and civic employees must do. They will come to see the complexities of the decision-making process and in working around citizen interests.

As students get going with the unit activities, it’s important to stress that one just doesn’t show up at a city council meeting with a new idea. City Council meetings are a place where citizens can share opinions, but not necessarily the forum to bring a new idea forward for the first time. New ideas have to start “in committee” and work their way up. Through several series of questions, answers and public input, ideas become *motions* and motions become *resolutions*.

In this particular scenario, the ideas start before Parks & Planning (P&P) committee. Let’s walk through the process:

1. The Hikers and the Youth Coalition must first get themselves on the agenda for P&P committee meeting by completing a formal piece of paperwork requesting to make a presentation at the next meeting.
2. Both groups will need to formally convince the P&P that their projects are worth considering. They need to make presentations of their respective proposals for the committee and be prepared to answer questions.
3. The P&P Director and committee will ask questions until they are satisfied that the project suggestions **respond to real needs in the community and would be supported by the citizens**. The P&P Director will then recommend that the proposals move to the Finance committee that will determine whether or not they are financially feasible. The P&P Director should complete the paperwork for the proposals to get on the agenda of the next Finance committee meeting.
4. The Finance committee meeting operates in a very similar fashion to the P&P meeting, only this time it’s all about project expenses. In preparation for this presentation, both project teams need to think very seriously about costs and value. Learners should keep in mind that is it possible that the overall value of a project to the whole community could potentially outweigh the hard costs. Teams should be prepared to respond to a battery of questions regarding value to the community, one-time costs, long-term maintenance expenses, and possible

income potential. When the Finance Director determines the proposals **offer reasonable returns on investment in terms of value and service to the community if not hard money** (possibly both), they will be endorsed to move forward to the City Council. The appropriate paperwork must be completed by both the Finance and the P&P Director to get on the agenda of the next City Council meeting and should include the articulation of both ideas in the form of resolutions to be moved upon at the meeting.

5. The City Council meeting will be an open session and public comment will be permitted. After presentations, the mayor and council will ask questions of the presenters and hear from the citizens. At the conclusion of the meeting, the resolutions will be voted on and the idea that **most represents the desires and needs of the community, provides the greatest value to the community, and best reflects Mr. Beerich's intentions will be endorsed as the official project of the bequest.** (Projects of this type are typically named after the benefactor.)

Learners may have heard the term “the court of public opinion”. Some of the informal variables that come into play with public processes are the impacts of the press, social media, and the word on the street (not to mention the personalities and interests of the people in office). We have interjected a few of these into the unit to keep things more realistic and lively.

The teacher should serve primarily as facilitator while learners piece together information to fill in the blanks (especially when connections between finances, municipal services and social responsibility are not made) and to ensure that students follow the *protocols*. Intricate details may elude certain students or classes. Don't worry: the big ideas are most important. We have provided descriptions of typical committee work scopes and organization structures to help learners understand how the committees are intertwined. We've also included some basic information regarding open public meetings and simple rules of *parliamentary procedure* by which they are run. (*Robert's Rules of Order* are generally favored in American government but are complex enough to be an entire unit in themselves.) The goal here is not to master the protocols as much as to understand that they drive the structure of meetings and the processes of legislation.

There are five activities in this unit corresponding to the steps of movement through the process. They should happen in sequence, but can obviously be adjusted depending on the age and experience of the learners and/or the amount of allotted time. If participants already have a knowledge base regarding municipal government, it may not be necessary to review all of the content. In a non-academic setting you may choose to skip the assessment options entirely.

Educators know their students. If it makes sense to appoint a mayor and directors and keep them consistent throughout the unit, please do so. If more students would benefit from leadership opportunities, feel free to mix them up daily. Maybe the teacher will prefer to manage the unit as the mayor her- or himself? It's your call; make whatever adjustments you need for your learners. Have fun with it!

A WORD ABOUT DISCIPLINARY LITERACY

The Common Core State Standards include literacy standards specific to content areas that are essential for a well-rounded education. There are terms used in this unit that are part of the operational vocabulary of government. In order for this unit to reach its fullest potential (i.e. produce citizens that actively engage in local issues), the learners will need to develop a working understanding of these terms. A vocabulary list is provided; relevant terms have been underlined in this document for easy reference. It is up to individual educators to decide how to best present it for their students (e.g. at the beginning of the unit as a glossary, as a “word wall”, or in context during instruction).

To find more information on disciplinary literacy use the link below:
<http://dpi.wi.gov/standards/disciplinaryliteracy.html>

IF YOU WANT TO GO FURTHER

Find your municipal government website. Look at its structure and organization and compare it with this unit. You may wish to tweak the activities here to align more closely your area. The link below will help locate your specific city, town or village.
http://www.wisconsin.gov/state/core/wisconsin_cities_towns_and_villages.html

ACTIVITY 1 | *Introduction to Municipal Government*

PREPARATION

Materials:

[Unit 'Before' Evaluation](#) (one copy per learner)
[Map, demographics, and site considerations document](#)
[Activity 1 Assignment](#) (print or display if desired)
[Tips for Credible Presentations](#) (print or display)
[Request to be on agenda and meeting agenda template](#)

Public commentary:

- [News article from Anytown High School Advisor](#)
- [Email from birdlvr](#)
- [Phone message – Office of the Mayor](#)

Logistics:

Students will spend the majority of the session working in two groups. Students will need to sit and work together after the assignment has been given. The groups can be organized spontaneously or ahead of time. Each group should have a designated discussion facilitator, recorder to take notes, and a presenter for Activity 2. A Parks & Planning Director should be designated in advance for Activity 2.

1. Introduce the unit content and provide overview of local government structures.
2. Have learners take the unit **'Before' Evaluation** to establish their levels of prior knowledge. *Optional:* Hold a brief discussion to determine what they already know about the services and functions of local government. This is also an opportunity to plant seeds for thinking before the assignment is given.
3. Share the map and demographics of Anytown, Wisconsin.
4. The teacher reads the bequest made to the municipality, then adds that a couple of groups have formed that are interested in putting suggestions forward to the City Council for using this gift. A hiking group would like to see the development of a public park on some existing municipal green space, and a coalition of youth service organizations would like to see the revitalization of a vacant old school building as a community youth center.
5. Students will be asked to work as two teams to build strong cases for the creation of one or the other of these options. They should be prepared to make a presentation at the next meeting of Anytown's Parks & Planning Committee.

Students should consider the following as they work:

- The nature and intention of the bequest
- Budget for the initial project
- The cost of long-term upkeep
- Community needs
- Citizen interests

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- Necessary *utilities*
- Public safety
- Potential for *revenue*

[Note: The meeting with the Finance Committee (Activity 3) will explore costs in greater detail, so right now students should be working generally with the \$5 million figure.]

6. Introduce the public commentary pieces as the students work. You may choose to hand these out as paper documents, or have select students present them through role play.
7. Allow students to digest these bits of information. Do they have an impact on the plans that are being made for the presentations to the P&P? Could it have an impact later, as the plans get closer to the city council? Should they even bother with a petition signed by under-aged citizens?
8. A formal request must be filed in order to get on the agenda of municipal committee meeting. At the end of the session, the P&P Director will file requests for both the Hikers and the Youth Coalition to get their project proposals on the agenda of the next Parks & Planning Committee meeting.
9. Once the requests have been filed, remind the students that in the end only one project will move forward toward *resolution*. The project proposal that will finally be selected will be the one that has most thoroughly considered and responded to the needs of the citizens at reasonable cost. They should be prepared to give their project the best possible chance at getting through the committees and on to the City Council.
10. Teacher appoints a Director of Parks & Planning that will conduct the committee meeting and gives her/him materials to review before Activity 2.

ACTIVITY 2 | *Presentation to the Parks & Planning Committee*

PREPARATION

Materials:

[Parliamentary Procedures brochures](#) (one per learner)

[Questions from the P&P Committee](#)

[Parks and Planning Committee notes form](#)

Public commentary:

- [Memorandum from Police Chief](#)
- [Letter to the Editor from Joe Thomas](#)
- [City Memorandum from Dave Smith](#)

[Request to be on agenda and meeting agenda template](#)

Logistics:

The classroom should be configured to resemble a meeting room at City Hall. The P&P Director and Committee sit at the front of the room facing the presenting group.

The Hikers and the Youth Coalition groups take turns serving as members of the P&P Committee during this activity.

One (1) Finance Director and a Finance Committee (anywhere from 1 to 10 other people depending on size of class) should be designated in advance for Activity 3.

1. Begin with a brief introduction to *parliamentary procedure* that will be used in the committee meetings. Review and practice making *motions* as necessary before transitioning into the meeting itself.
2. Allow students time to prepare for their presentations. You may choose to introduce the public commentary pieces as the students work, or have them presented during the questioning period with the P&P Committee. Your decision may depend on how the students' plans are coming together. Will this new information help them come up with questions to ask on their own, or change the types of questions they ask?
3. Instruct learners serving as the P&P Committee to ask probing questions. Based on what they already know from the maps and city demographic data, what things would they want to know about a park proposal? They should take notes throughout the questioning and present both groups with feedback of their respective proposal's strengths and concerns at the end of the session.
4. Allow the learners to follow their own thought processes through this discussion. Some questions have been provided if necessary to spur discussion, but the experience will be more authentic if learners can move this through organic conversation.
5. The P&P Director calls the meeting to order with Youth Coalition serving as the P&P Committee (the Hikers will present first). The Hikers will alternately serve as the P&P Committee while the Youth Coalition presents their plan. (NOTE: This would not actually happen in the "real world". We are doing this here simply to keep all learners engaged

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through the activity. It is important that the students divest themselves from their roles in their respective advocacy groups while serving as the P&P Committee.)

6. The Hikers present their plan to the P&P Committee.
7. Questions are asked of the Hikers by the P&P Director and committee.
8. The Hikers then serve as P&P Committee while the Youth Coalition presents their plan.
9. Questions are asked of the Youth Coalition by the P&P Committee (now the Hikers).
10. Once satisfied, the P&P Committee moves to send both proposals forward to the Finance Committee.
11. P&P Director recommends that both plans in detail be forwarded to the Finance Committee and files requests for both groups to be on the agenda at the next Finance Committee meeting.
12. Teacher appoints a Finance Director and assigns a Finance Committee for Activity 3.
13. Because the Q&A can often introduce things students haven't considered, provide a few moments at the end of this session for the groups to meet again to contemplate any details they'd like to add or adjustments they'd like to make to their plans before presenting to the Finance Committee.

ACTIVITY 3| *Presentation to the Finance Committee*

PREPARATION

Materials:

[Cost comparisons for park vs. school renovation](#) (one or more copies for the respective planning groups)

[Questions from the Finance Committee](#)

[Finance Committee notes form](#)

Public commentary:

- [Transcript of a local television interview](#)
- [News article from *Anytown Gazette* on the old school building](#)
- [Good Morning Today! news item](#)
- [News photo from *Anytown Gazette*](#)

[Request to be on agenda and meeting agenda template](#)

[Resolution authorizing expenditure template](#)

Logistics:

The classroom should be configured to resemble a meeting room at City Hall. The Finance Director and Committee sit at the head of the room facing the presenters.

At this point the groups are have been scaled: members of both the Hiker group and the Youth Coalition have been reassigned to form the Finance Committee. The Finance Committee members will not change through the remainder of the unit.

In preparation for Activity 4, teacher assigns roles for City Council meeting: Mayor, P&P Director, Finance Director, Executive Board members (2 to 10 people depending on size of group), Hikers and Youth Coalition leaders and co-leaders, (perhaps more team members if group is large), citizen commentators that will be given their notes at the beginning of Activity 4 (one for each comment).

1. The teacher introduces the point and purpose of a *resolution* and talks about it as the end goal of this process.
2. Present both groups with a copy of the cost comparison spreadsheet appropriate for their project. Allow a little bit of time for review and any adjustments to plans prior to facing the Finance Committee. Do any adjustments need to be made?
3. The P&P Director formally presents the plans to the Finance Director.
4. The Finance Director calls the meeting to order.
5. The Hikers present their plan to the Finance Committee.
6. Questions are asked of the Hikers by the Finance Director and committee regarding construction, maintenance, staffing, sustainability, income potential, etc. As in Activity 2, allow the learners to follow their own thought processes through this discussion. Some questions have been provided if necessary to spur discussion, but the experience will be more

authentic if learners can move this through organic conversation. The Finance Committee should take notes throughout the questioning and present both groups with feedback of their respective proposal's strengths and concerns at the end of the session.

7. As the discussion moves, the public commentary should be made by the citizen participants when appropriate or when signaled by the facilitator. These comments are intended to support or change the conversations. Do they? Pay attention to how the learners process new bits of information and apply them to their presentations or use them to make changes to their plans.
8. The Youth Coalition presents their plan to the Finance Committee.
9. Questions are asked of the Youth Coalition by the Finance Director and committee. The appropriate public commentary should be interjected here as relevant, which may or may not change this portion of the conversation.
10. Once satisfied, the Finance Committee will move to send both options to the City Council for possible resolution. Both presentation groups will use the Resolution Template to draft their proposals for presentation at the City Council meeting.
11. The Finance Director sends a request to the Mayor that both options be included as resolutions at the next City Council meeting and forwards the completed resolution paperwork with that request.
12. Once on the agenda, the two groups may want to work together for just a few moments to tighten up their presentations before the City Council meeting.

ACTIVITY 4 | *Presentation to the City Council*

PREPARATION

Materials:

[Questions from the City Council](#)

Public commentary:

- [Letter to the City Council from Aretha Franks](#)
- [Letter to the City Council from Mary Martin](#)
- [Letter to the Editor from Bill Stuessy](#)
- [X-ray of broken collarbone](#)

Logistics:

The room should be arranged to resemble City Council chambers. City Council should sit in the front of the room facing the public with Mayor at the head. P&P and Finance Directors are part of the City Council and should sit accordingly.

1. The facilitator may choose to introduce the public commentary pieces as students prepare for the City Council meeting, or to have them presented by participants serving as members of the community during the public comment section of the meeting. Depending on the direction the plans have taken in the previous meetings, the facilitator may choose to create new and unique public comments. Highly engaged students might even be trusted to develop and present their own comments at the meeting.
2. Both plans are presented as resolutions in complete form with details and financial information by the P&P and Finance Directors who endorse them to the City Council. Led by the mayor, the City Council asks questions and holds discussion on both resolutions. As before, some questions have been provided if necessary to spur discussion.
3. The session is then opened to public commentary where scripted comments and/or student voices are introduced. Public comments should be directed to the City Council, not to the groups that wrote and presented the plans. The City Council will call upon the planning groups if more information or details are needed. Pay attention to how the learners process these interactions. Is it difficult to stick to the protocol during this session? Do plans change? Are there any emotional responses? These reactions should be explored at the end of the activity.
4. The two resolutions are moved on by the City Council for adoption and votes are taken by the council. One will ultimately be approved and the other voted down. The students will come to a conclusion based on the overall momentum of a particular plan, including its detail, financial feasibility, and the tide of public support. There is no “correct” choice for

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any class; the unit is designed to be purposefully flexible. Each group will find the points and issues that resonate in their discussions, leading them to a plan that seems logical and satisfies the desires of the majority.

5. At the conclusion of the City Council meeting, students should return to their roles as learners. Recap the unit activities and ask:
 - Were they satisfied with the outcome of the meeting? If so, why; if not, why not?
 - What were the biggest challenges in getting their idea from conception to the City Council meeting?
 - What parts of the process were most interesting? Annoying? Surprising?
 - Which public comments (letters to the editor, personal statements, phone messages, etc.) were most effective in getting points across? What could have made weak approaches more effective?
 - If this scenario had happened in their community, what might the public response have been? How might they have become involved?

ACTIVITY 5| *Tying it all Together*

PREPARATION

Materials:

[‘After’ Evaluation](#) (one copy per learner)

Optional:

[Learner self-evaluation](#)

[Performance rubric](#)

[Unit Reflection questions](#)

[Reflection rubric for instruction completion](#)

1. This session begins with a review of the municipal decision-making process. The teacher will then facilitate a group discussion, applying knowledge from the unit experience to a municipal or state issue. This may be done in either as a whole or in small groups.
 - Identify a current issue of public policy at local or state level.
 - What major groups are interested in that issue, and what are their positions?
 - At what points has information become available to citizens? What actions have been taken as a result of gaining information? How can citizens monitor or influence the process?
 - What are the processes by which public policy concerning that issue is formed and carried out?
 - What impacts, both positive and negative, might decisions on this issue have on the lives and welfare of citizens?
 - Why do conflicts about values, principles, and interests sometimes make agreement difficult or impossible on certain issues of public policy (e.g., taxation, gun control, environmental issues, right-to-life, etc.)?
2. Following the discussion, students individually complete the ‘After’ evaluation.

ASSESSMENT OPTIONS

1. Learners may complete self-evaluation rubric.
2. Teacher may complete student performance rubrics for each participant.
3. Learners are assigned a reflective project that will respond to the following:
 - Describe at least 3 ways citizens can have a voice in local government decision-making. Evaluate their effectiveness in influencing the process. Which of these methods would you be mostly likely to use yourself? Why do you feel that way?
 - Think of a local issue that concerns you, or a policy in your community you’d like to change. What could you do to express your opinion?