

National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation's  
**March 2010 Featured Member**

**JOHN SPADY**

*and the*



**More Information:**

<http://www.thataway.org/?p=2401>



*www.ncdd.org*

## Introduction

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When I was around 11 years old, my father and his business partners were already well known in Seattle for a [fast food restaurant that still bears his name today](#). But around this same time he brought home an interesting piece of “new technology” for the times... [an IBM 029 keypunch machine](#). He had started learning how to use it while taking classes at the University of Washington but all his time away from the family convinced him to rent a machine and use it at home. We all appreciated having dad around more.



John Spady

I learned how to keypunch and how to submit a deck of cards for processing. This encouraged my interest in learning how to type, and then how to program. That first machine, and wanting to be close to my father, eventually led to my education in technology during [the early days of the microcomputer revolution](#) and brought me an appreciation of my father’s quest to improve dialogue within organizations and his eventual focus on the dialogue between governments and citizens.

My father’s focus on how to improve the dialogue between government and citizens took a very long time to gain any kind of traction. [He was acknowledged for his vision back in 1993](#) but was never able to translate that recognition into statewide legislative action. [His last attempt at the state level was in 2007](#).

So, after his final attempt failed, and at the age of 83, [he submitted Initiative 24](#), not to the voters of the State of Washington, but instead to King County, and home to the largest city in the state: Seattle. In the end, over 80,000 valid signatures were collected. King County Councilmembers, for the first time in their history, decided to directly enact the initiative and so [voted unanimously to create the Citizen Councilor Network](#). Its first project, designed to meet the specific criteria of the new ordinance, is called the *Countywide Community Forums*.

**-John Spady, Executive Vice-President and Director of Research, Forum Foundation**

## Countywide Community Forums

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### What are the Countywide Community Forums and how do they work?

The newly enacted ordinance gave responsibility to the [King County Auditor's Office](#) (KCAO) for its oversight. According to the ordinance, the purpose of the *Countywide Community Forums* is "to enhance citizen participation, civic engagement, and citizenship education in government through a network of periodic public forums...."

The ordinance approved by the King County government stipulated that no tax dollars would be used to establish and maintain the new network. It depends solely on tax-exempt contributions from individuals, businesses, and foundations. The salary of the program manager responsible for the project inside the KCAO is paid for by outside contributions.

The *Countywide Community Forums* were developed to implement the goals of the Citizen Councilor Network. *It has three primary components:*

1. Registration of Citizen Councilors;
2. Meeting management tools to connect hosts and guests; and
3. Opinionnaire® survey tabulation and reporting tools

The KCAO uses its website for official information and to post results from each round of the forums. However, the three components listed above are managed by a parallel [non-government controlled \(i.e. public\) website](#).

#### Registration

The public website collects required contact information (such as home/work address and phone number) and optional demographic information (such as gender, age, racial heritage, etc.) Collecting demographic information during registration allows us to contrast anonymous demographic information collected from Opinionnaire® surveys during each round of forums.

#### Meeting Management Tools

The public website also provides a critical means for connecting hosts (Citizen Councilors who help to physically facilitate meetings in homes, libraries, or other public places) and guests (Citizen Councilors who are not hosts). We use a "mashup" that combines a Google Map with meeting information from each scheduled host forum. Guests go to the map, find a convenient meeting, and confirm their attendance. Hosts can send follow-up e-mail or snail mail to all attending guests and also send invitations to nearby Citizen Councilors who have not yet confirmed their attendance at any other meeting.

If someone has no time to meet face-to-face during the six-weeks allowed for each round of forums, they can still participate by filling out the Opinionnaire® survey online using a one-time anonymous access code.

#### Opinionnaire® Survey Tabulation And Reporting

This component utilizes survey analysis and a "Fast Forum™" report from the Forum Foundation. The primary feature of a Fast Forum™ report is the [Polarization-Consensus Rating™](#) (PC-Rating). The rating quickly shows the degree of divergent or convergent opinions expressed by Citizen Councilors across different demographics and is a major feature of analysis for the *Countywide Community Forums*.

## A Brief Organizational Description

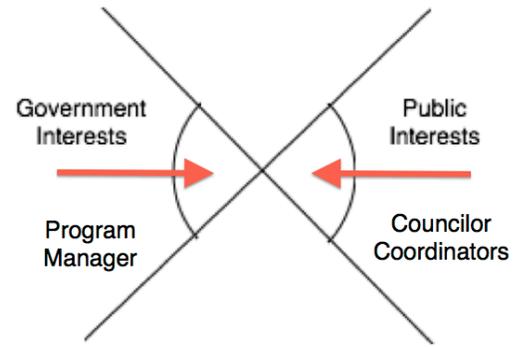
To make the *Countywide Community Forums* both independent from government while at the same time effective and accessible for participants inside government, the organizational design effects a de facto “double veto” arrangement between the government Auditor (through the program manager) and the public’s Citizen Councilor Coordinator. Both have to work well together in order to keep the program moving along.

### Program Manager

The program manager represents the day-to-day interests of the Auditor. This county employee represents the government’s interest in the Citizen Councilor Network and is the focal point for all inter-governmental cooperation in the program back to the public.

### Citizen Councilor Coordinators

The Citizen Councilor Coordinator is the volunteer administrator of the Citizen Councilor Network, as appointed by the Auditor. The Auditor also appoints two Deputy Citizen Councilor Coordinators to serve as assistants. Their job is to represent the public’s interest in the Citizen Councilor Network and they are the focal point for all public interaction back into the program.



## How are the forums organized?

### The importance of hosts and guests

Our entire process depends on the kindness of hosts and the interests of guests.

Prior to the beginning of each round of forums, we send out e-mail solicitations to all people who have expressed an interest in hosting, and ask them to arrange for a location and then go to our website, log in, and confirm their meeting date, time, and location. All scheduled meetings then appear in a publically accessible map.

Any participating guests must log in to confirm their attendance and when they do they are given all the necessary information about the meeting they have selected. Any guests without access to a computer can call our local or toll free phone numbers for confirmation. Any person may host multiple meetings but can answer only one Opinionnaire® survey.

Hosts are notified of each attending guest for additional outreach and follow up.

### Meeting-in-a-Box

Hosts are sent everything necessary to conduct their meeting. [The Auditor approves all materials.](#)

*Contents include:*

- Instructions for a successful meeting;
- Background issue materials and a professional-grade DVD topic video;
- Anonymous Opinionnaire® survey materials; and
- A pre-stamped envelope for the return of completed surveys to the Auditor’s Office.

# What purpose do the forums serve?

## Strengthening Social Capital

In the Preamble ordinance adopted by the King County council it states, “One key to a sustainable community is an informed and sustainable dialogue among leaders and people. Citizens need new, more convenient and effective ways to share their opinions with other citizens and the leaders of their organizations, institutions and governments. This is a process of building social capital through both bonding and bridging dialogue and improving community mental health and happiness....”



*Countywide Community Forums* help strengthen social capital throughout the broadest dimensions of our communities, creating opportunities for extended interactions among willing people — both face-to-face and in supportive online environments.

With this insight we are now ready to re-imagine the concept of a typical face-to-face public or town hall meeting and extend its traditional forms of interaction into larger, and distributed, network structures while, at the same time, strengthening the social skills of individual participants.

## Extending The Paradigm of the Public Meeting

*Large public meetings can be difficult. Do these problems sound familiar?*

- So many people attend a public meeting that it drags on for hours.
- People are sometimes disrespectful of others during the meeting – they might talk too long, they might shout other people down, they might even try to change the focus of the meeting altogether.
- A lot of people just listen – they don’t seem to want to risk speaking up in front of others.
- A lot of good ideas get presented but most of the time no one asks how you feel about what is being said – no one measures the opinions of the people there.
- The loudest voices seem to get all the attention but ideas from the quiet voices should have attention paid to them as well.

*In contrast, here are some of the experiences people have during a community forum:*

- Each forum is small – typically from 4 to 12 people.
- Because there are fewer people attending any particular forum, it is completed relatively quickly.
- Forums are hosted by ordinary people – other registered Citizen Councilors – who agree to arrange a physical space for people to meet: perhaps in their home, an office, a library, a place of worship, or any other convenient location.
- Because forums are distributed throughout the community and hosted by just plain folks, there is no opportunity for outside groups to dominate the dialogue. There is no shouting, no Robert’s Rules of Order, no filters between participants.
- Hosts are not considered facilitators – they don’t have to be trained in the issues or in the techniques of conversation. Hosts receive everything necessary to conduct their meeting in a box mailed to them as soon as they confirm a date and time.
- Every person in a forum is listened to respectfully and is heard by others.
- All opinions are treated equally and the anonymous collective responses from all participants are gathered, tabulated, reported, and made public. Public officials analyze these opinions and acknowledge the contributions of the participating Citizen Councilors.

This is a new idea for public meetings; a way to increase the participation of people in the organizations of governance; and a way to strengthen the important social skills of a society through its individual citizens.

## How are the forums funded?

One of our biggest hurdles was cost. How did we justify funding this publically mandated program to a public that largely believes they are overly taxed already for traditional and vital public services such as healthcare, public safety, and education?

### No Tax Dollars

In good times, tax dollars would have been the usual solution. But in these difficult financial times, the project simply had to fund itself – by direct appeal to the greater civic interests in the community. The county created a [web page for online donations](#) to a dedicated, and tax exempt, trust fund. The Auditor’s Office has received 69 donations ranging from \$1 to \$100 for a total of \$1,200. We very much appreciate these contributions but we remain far from a sustainable funding source for the time being.

### Partnerships Are Vital

This story now returns full circle to my father, and to our family business. With the backing of his family, my father pledged that his private business, [Dick’s Drive-In Restaurants](#), would underwrite the cost for the first two years of the *Countywide Community Forums*. This included the cost of the county employee in the Auditor’s Office, and all the costs associated with production, distribution, and website creation: a stated commitment of \$350,000. Now in its third year, Dick’s Drive-In has recommitted itself through the end of 2010.

### What Are The Results So Far?

*The links below are to the video presentations of the previous topics:*

- [Transportation](#): Public Priorities, Choices, and Funding – June, 2008
- [Citizen Priorities for County Government](#): Budget and Strategic Priorities – Feb, 2009
- [Values and Performance](#) of King County Government – May, 2009
- [Public Safety](#): Law and Justice – Sept, 2009

The primary materials and the final reports from these rounds are available at the [website of the King County Auditor](#).

After each round was analyzed, a public presentation was made to the King County Council and a press release was made. A number of newspaper references and television mentions occurred. An in-depth review with staff and policy advisors was suggested and will occur after the conclusion of Round 5.

## What are the challenges we face?

### The “Right” To Be Heard

One ongoing challenge is to demonstrate to participants that their views and opinions are really being heard and considered by government decision makers. We have suggested to the county that they focus on topics that are “framed” more precisely, that topics are generally “actionable” within a reasonable timeframe, and that more effort is taken to acknowledge, analyze, and integrate the opinions of Citizen Councilors into public policy decisions. Obviously, no one expects that the majority opinions in a given “round” will be directly translated into policy, but people do expect their participation to be acknowledged and their opinions considered.

## Increased Participation

Another challenge is to increase participation levels. According to a recent evaluation by the CCF Program Manager in the Auditor's office, participation rates over the first four rounds dropped from 549 to 208. But she concludes, "while low participation is a problem overall, it is less so in relation to this goal (to improve on the traditional public hearing process), since 200 people is considered good attendance for a (single) public hearing" (clarification added).

We are continuing to reach out to our diverse cultural communities, improving our use of social media, strengthening our connections to hyper-local blogs, and focusing beyond our own immediate interests and issues to highlight the broader issues of the public's capacities [for improving social capital](#) in general.

## A Sustainable Funding Stream

Our final challenge is how/where to secure a sustainable funding stream. While I believe in the advantages of a self-funded public program, it has been difficult to secure funding apart from our own family business. Tax dollars would be nice but that brings a whole other set of public expectations that can be difficult to deal with. We continue to seek collaborative partners and funders although this remains a challenge at the present time.

## What's ahead?

### Transitions of People And Purpose

My father is now 86 years old. The Auditor recently appointed him as Coordinator Emeritus in recognition of his long time passion to improve the civic lives of the people of King County and Washington State. He has achieved a lasting influence on this project, and on my own life as well.

My brother Jim has stepped down as Deputy Councilor Coordinator to focus on education reform efforts in Washington State. His political acumen will be greatly missed.

Dick's Drive-In Restaurants has hired two new employees whose focus will be to increase participation levels; spur public focus on civic engagement, citizen participation, and citizenship education; and better engage the public in a transforming media landscape. We are staking out a larger public platform for these issues at our [Social Capital Review blog](#).

### Offering Our Experience To Others - If You Build It, They Will Come

Other counties in Washington State and North Carolina have been in contact with us. People and their governments are looking for solutions to similar problems: how to effectively engage communities of interconnected individuals in the search for solutions to important public policy issues. Our eventual solutions will be easier to implement if we all have a hand, and a voice, in their design.

### Important Links From This Article

- [King County official website for Countywide Community Forums \(CCF\)](#)
- [Registration and meeting management website for CCF](#)
- [The Social Capital Review blog](#)
- [About the author](#)

## Various Links to Additional Information About Our Featured Member(s)

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### Twitter:

<http://www.twitter.com/ccfkc> (Countywide Community Forums aka CCF)

<http://www.twitter.com/SocialCapReview> (Social Capital Review blog)

<http://www.twitter.com/jspady> (personal)

### Facebook:

<http://www.tinyurl.com/ccf-facebook> (Countywide Community Forums)

<http://www.facebook.com/jspady> (personal)

<http://www.facebook.com/DicksDriveIn> (corporate underwriters of CCF)

### LinkedIn:

<http://www.linkedin.com/in/jspady> (not very descriptive unless you are already logged into LinkedIn)

### NCDD:

<http://www.thataway.org/ncddnet/JSpady> (John's profile on NCDD)

### Photos:

[http://www.thataway.org/ncddnet/uploads\\_user/1000/16/0\\_4278.jpg](http://www.thataway.org/ncddnet/uploads_user/1000/16/0_4278.jpg) (NCDD picture)

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/andyfluke/2925197985/> (made by Andy during 2008 conference)

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/jspady/2140557/page2/> (reference to John and his son Alex)

### Videos:

<http://www.canyons.com/KCCF/Orientation/KCCF.swf> (orientation video of Countywide Community Forums)

<http://kcts9.org/series/kcts-9-specials/video/countywide-community-forums> (Countywide Community Forums)

### Other Important Sites:

<http://www.KingCounty.gov/operations/CommunityForums> (official King County website about CCF)

<http://CommunityForums.org> (registration and meeting management non-government website)

<http://ForumFoundation.org> (supplies the underlying technology for Countywide Community Forums)

<http://DicksDriveIn.com> (family business that helps underwrite all our community dialogue projects)