

Peekskill Community Congress: A Lesson in Participatory Democracy

By Tobias Roberts

Mark Twain once famously wrote that “if voting made any difference, they wouldn’t let us do it.” On the national political level, many people might feel the futility that comes with voting for candidates who more often than not defend partisan issues rather than the people they were elected to represent. In 2015, well over half of the elected members of Congress were millionaires, which is yet another reminder of the rift between politicians and the people who elect them. In the Greater Hudson Valley, however, an inspiring initiative called “community congresses” is attempting to redefine what democratic participation should really look like.

We recently sat down to talk with Jason Angell, one of the founders of the community congress initiative in the Greater Hudson Valley to learn about how this example of direct, participatory democracy is encouraging communities to get involved with issues that affect their communities and livelihoods.

The Origins of the Community Congress Model

Jason Angell and his partner Jocelyn Apicello live near Phillipstown where they run a small farm and a nonprofit called the Ecological Citizens project. A couple of years ago they received a grant to do creative civic work in order to get people more involved in volunteering in their communities and to become more involved in local government initiatives. “We really got involved because we felt that at the national political level there is so much back and forth partisan arguing,” Jason tells us. “We wanted to find a process where regular people could have a say in what their priorities are.”

The idea for the creating of community congresses where people could come together to define and vote on the priorities for their own communities, was seen as a strategy for the common voices of citizens to be heard. Whereas issues that affect local communities are often drowned out in the gridlock that defines partisan politics on a national level, the community congress model would allow people to find common ground beyond the polarizing partisan politics that affect much of the nation.

The Process

Throughout much of the last year and a half, Jason and Jocelyn have been involved in the organization of a Community Congress in Peekskill, which is the second Community Congress after the first one was successfully held in Phillipstown in 2016-2017. To get started, Jason and Jocelyn spent several months building relationships with diverse members of the community. They talked with existing community groups regardless of their political or religious affiliation to explain the process and importance of the Community Congress model. The hardest part, according to Jason, was getting people to see that there was no hidden agenda. “One of the most powerful things about (the Community Congress model)...is that the agenda is completely up to how the community votes.”

Once several members and groups of the Peekskill community were on board, three public forums were organized for this past December, January, and February. The forums were publicized through newspaper and online ads, community meetings and handing out flyers. At the forums, anyone 13 and older that was a Peekskill resident could propose a priority at the forum on a first come, first serve basis. Over 35 people came up with specific community proposals for what types of actions were needed to improve the Peekskill community. Each of the forums were attended by anywhere between 100 to 150 people, and had, according to Jason, “a democracy meets American idol vibe.” The presenters of the proposals were given three minutes to share their ideas for improving Peekskill. After hearing several different priorities presented, a space for socialization was opened so that diverse members of the community could socialize and get to know one another.

After the forums finished up, the 35 proposals were put on a physical ballot and mailed to every residential address in Peekskill. The ballots allowed every resident 13 and older to vote on their top three priorities among the list of 35 proposals. Around 1,500 people cast ballots in the Peekskill vote, which turned out to be around 30% of voters in the last Peekskill

local election. The fact that about one-third of voters cast their ballot adds some political weight to the ideas and proposals expressed through the Community Congress. In late April, the results of the voting were shared with the Peekskill community.

Giving Youth a Political Voice and an Opportunity to Engage

One of the unique aspects of the Community Congress is that it opened voting to anyone over the age of 13, and half of the total amount voters were youth under the age of 18. The fact that three young people proposed ideas for the ballot allowed young people in the community to mobilize around ideas and proposals that represented young people’s ideas for the community. The Peekskill School District also became a partner in the process and encouraged students to participate as an example of civic engagement that went beyond a simple social studies homework assignment.

Once the most voted proposals are released to the community, Jason and the rest of the leadership team will create strategies to get people engaged in volunteering to turn those proposals into a reality. “On the ballot, people can check a box to volunteer for one of the top priorities,” Jason mentions. Around 880 people in the Peekskill ballot provided their email and phone number to volunteer for the community priorities that they voted for.

The Phillipstown Community Congress offers insight into how the voted proposals were acted upon by the local community. One of the top priorities identified by the participants in Phillipstown was the need to create a town level opioid crisis coordinator. Three months after the Community Congress vote, the local Phillipstown government created an opioid crisis coordinator position, thus revealing how true democracy can really work. Furthermore, the Phillipstown Community Congress vote revealed that a majority of residents favored creating a more biking and walking infrastructure across the community. After the vote was held, a group of local community members was able to get a federal grant to begin the process of creating more opportunities for biking and walking. “Letting people propose their own