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TOP STORY

First-ever civic assembly gives residents chance to be heard

By DON SERGENT dsergent@bgdailynews.com Feb 4, 2018

The Bowling Green Civic Assembly, a partnership between the Daily News and the American Assembly at Columbia University, will use the pol.is online survey site to conduct a virtual town hall Sunday through Feb. 14 that will be followed by a face-to-face town hall Feb. 22 and a community workshop Feb. 23. Together, those events are geared toward identifying and addressing the most pressing issues in our community.

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The combination of virtual and face-to-face aspects makes this civic assembly groundbreaking both for American Assembly, founded in 1950, and the Daily News, which has served the Bowling Green community since 1854.

“This is an experiment, the first of its kind,” said Joe Karaganis, vice president of the American Assembly. “We try to create consensus around public policy issues. Usually, we get people together for three or four days and cover a gamut of issues. That methodology has become expensive and not as vital to how public policy conversations happen today.”

In this case, Karaganis explained, the virtual town hall segment of the civic assembly will drive the agenda.

Visitors to the survey site will be able to respond to questions already created through interaction with local elected officials and community leaders, and they can also create their own statements to help build the survey.

People can visit the survey more than once and will see only newly created questions when they come back. They will also be able to view results.

Such a platform for community input is unusual for any type of news media and particularly for newspapers, said Daily News Director of Media Operations Joe Imel.

“What’s the role of the newspaper in the community?” asked Imel. “The main role is to keep people informed about what’s happening in the community, but there’s another role called solutions journalism where we connect citizens and public officials and try to find solutions to the most pressing issues.”

Imel worked with Sam Ford, a Knight News Innovation Fellow at Columbia University who lives in Bowling Green, to come up with the civic assembly concept.

“All news organizations want to figure out how to engage in the communities they serve,” said Ford, a part-time instructor at Western Kentucky University who also consults on innovation in media. “There aren’t a lot of examples like this one out there. I hope other communities can learn from what we’re doing.”

Imel and Ford have already brought many local decision-makers on board. One of them, Bowling Green City Manager Kevin DeFebbo, said the civic assembly aligns with his ideas about local government.



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“I think it’s a great idea and consistent with our values,” DeFebbo said. “Every two years the city does a survey asking what we can do better. We have taken some of those ideas and turned them into new programs.

“I think it’s great that the Daily News has taken the lead on this. It’s not very often that a newspaper is out front in trying to find solutions.”

DeFebbo said he and many of the city’s senior managers will be on hand for the face-to-face town hall to be held Feb. 22 at La Gala on Chestnut Street and for the community workshop Feb. 23 at the same location.

Community leaders and local residents will come together at those events to work toward solutions for problems identified through the virtual town hall. That’s the whole purpose behind this initiative, according to Daily News Editor Steve Gaines.

“The project’s purpose is to offer ideas and to connect local citizens and local public officials to help find solutions to issues people are concerned about in our community,” said Gaines. “Hopefully, through this project people from all across our great city will engage in positive dialogue with elected officials about their wants and desires.”

To have your voice heard, visit the bgdailynews.com website and click on the link to the Bowling Green Civic Assembly.

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