



## Peeling back the curtain on local government

When Linda Harris began working at city hall in her hometown of Decatur, Georgia, she noticed that the relationship between local government leaders and their constituents was often tense, or nonexistent. City workers were used to residents interacting with them when they had a complaint, for example. She came up with an idea: a straightforward class open to anyone in Decatur to learn about how their city government worked. Thus began “Decatur 101,” now a long-standing institution that even the mayor participated in. In this episode, host Jenna Spinelle talks with Linda and “Decatur 101” participants about why understanding how your government works, empowers you

to begin advocating for changes you want to see in your community.

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Jenna Spinelle: One Friday in 2016, I got home around 4 p.m. I left work a little early because it was Labor Day weekend, and as I stood in my dining room, unpacking my laptop from my bag, I heard a screeching sound followed by a crash outside. I remember feeling startled and jolted out of the long weekend relaxation that was just starting to set in. I ran to the window and saw a pick up truck sitting halfway in my neighbor’s yard with smoke coming out of it. The truck had demolished a few mailboxes, left a gash in the asphalt, but luckily—hadn’t hit any people or animals. I immediately knew why it happened.

See, my street used to get a lot of traffic. I live in State College, Pennsylvania—about three miles from Penn State’s campus and two miles from our downtown. If you were driving from one side of town to another, our street was a popular way to cut through. The speed limit is 25 miles per hour, but a lot of drivers never slowed down as they cut through. And this is something me and my neighbors had complained to each other about for years. We always felt like people were driving too fast and eventually someone would get hurt. So when this pick-up truck came speeding through and pancaked those mailboxes, we did all the usual complaining. But we also started making a plan.

I’m Jenna Spinelle, and this is When The People Decide. A show about how everyday people are shaping democracy.

Our first season focused on statewide ballot initiatives and people using that tool to make changes in their community. After the season aired, I heard from people all over the country who loved the idea of grassroots change but, like me, lived in a state that did not have access to the ballot initiative. So in this season, I zoomed in even further. I’ll be sharing stories about civic engagement at the hyperlocal level: people who are strengthening democracy in their city or town. It’s easy to dismiss such efforts as too small to make a difference. However, taken together, these stories represent a new form of civic power that’s necessary to fulfill America’s promise of becoming a multi-racial democracy. The more people who hear them, the more change we can all work together to bring about.

Which brings me back to the traffic drama on my street. It opened my eyes to HOW decisions are made in local government. First, we wrote a letter to the College Township council, the governing body for my part of town. We explained the situation and asked them to do... something about it. The police provided an official report but it didn't have the context of what we'd observed over the years. The council referred us to the traffic advisory committee (which I didn't even know was a thing!). Turns out, it's an offshoot of the township council that looks specifically at traffic issues and makes recommendations to the council. Suzie, one of my more outspoken neighbors, formed a committee of our own to work with them.

We sat through hours of long public meetings. We were constantly sending emails and Facebook messages among ourselves, to keep all of the neighbors updated. I forgot just how many it was until I went back through my inbox for this episode! We even went door to door to get our neighbors to weigh in on what they wanted to see happen. The options ranged from no change at all to closing the street completely at one end. I'll be honest- there were nights I didn't want to go to another traffic advisory committee meeting or read another email from Suzie. Sitting in a poorly lit room in an uncomfortable chair listening to people talk about traffic was not my favorite way to unwind after working all day.

But for more than a year, my neighbors and I kept going, kept working on it. There are issues like climate change or reproductive justice that can seem difficult to approach, like you don't quite know where to begin to make an impact. But this hyperlocal problem that was affecting my day to day life—people driving too fast on my street—felt important because it was a safety issue for me and my neighbors. And it was something that we felt we knew how to approach something that had an immediate solution that we could begin working on.

Clip of State College Town Council Meeting:

Okay so we have a motion to second. All those in favor, Aye [ayes]. Opposed? Okay, motion carries.

Spinelle: Eventually, the township closed our street on one end, so nobody could cut through anymore. The cars that were speeding from one end of town to the other weren't using our street to do that any more. We persisted, and we won.

Nowadays, when I go out for a run, I like to sprint the last quarter of a mile home because I know there will be no cars coming down the road. No cars speeding that could injure me. And I feel accomplished knowing I helped make the street safer for everyone who lives on it. But also, I felt like I understand the community I live in better. Learning what a traffic advisory committee is, being part of the political process—it showed me how things function in my town. Having that kind of information is empowering- if there's ever another issue I want to address in my neighborhood, I know who to talk to, and how the process works. Our first episode focuses on just that- the power of learning about your local government. And the local government at the center of this episode is in Decatur, Georgia.

Welcome to Decatur Video: "It's an old community and actually pre-dates Atlanta..."

Spinelle: Decatur is a small town, with a population around 24,000 people. It's just a few miles from Atlanta.

Linda Harris: So Decatur was actually founded before the city of Atlanta. Some people would say we were a suburb of Atlanta, and Decatur will tell you, no, we are a city, we are an urban city.

Spinelle: That's Linda Harris. She's the assistant city manager of Decatur.

Harris: We are about four and a half square miles. We are home to Agnes Scott College, which is a woman's college. We're about 10 minutes away from Emory University. We also have a Presbyterian seminary here, Presbyterian College.

Spinelle: Linda is not only a public servant for the city of Decatur, she also started a program that teaches Decatur's residents about their local government. The program she started is what we want to focus on this episode, because it's something that could be easily replicated in any community. But first, let's finish learning about Decatur.

Harris: We are the county seat of DeKalb County, so there's a lot of government offices here and professionals, lawyers, things that are related to the county. We're a very educated city according to the census. A lot of folks who work for CNN live here, or the ajc. You find all kinds of people here.

Spinelle: Decatur is very educated- 75 percent of the town's residents have a bachelor's degree or higher. Almost three quarters of the town is white and the average income is more than 100,000 dollars. Linda has lived here her entire life. As she told her grandson, during a recent school project.

Harris: I used to walk downtown every Saturday and go to the movies and go to the bookstore and go to the Drugstore. It's very walkable. It's very much like that today. My grandson interviewed me and he said what's different? I said, it's really very similar because he walks to school every day. it didn't quite have as many restaurants as it does now.

Spinelle: And Linda was not always a public servant. She was a stay at home mom for many years, and worked on and off for the local newspaper. When she was in her 30s, and her youngest child started preschool, she started asking what she wanted to do for herself now that she didn't have to be a full-time at-home parent.

Harris: I'd always wanted to be a writer, a journalist. I took some testing and you know, and the person said, well, you could go, go ahead and start writing for a newspaper or you could go get your college degree. And I thought, well, this is a good time to get it. So I got my degree from Agnes Scott College when I was older, 30 something.

Spinelle: She had worked for a few local newspapers covering a range of city issues—so when she went to school, she studied communications. .

Harris: When I finished, a friend of mine worked here at the city and she was looking for somebody to answer the phone and she knew I was looking for a job. And so I came here to answer the phone.

Spinelle: Right when she started the job, someone at the city showed her a press release they wrote about a new hotel opening in Decatur.

Harris: And I read it and I, I just, without thinking, I said, oh, this is horrible. Who wrote this?

Spinelle: Linda thought it was sooo badly written.

Harris: It was great information, but it was not a press release. Nobody was gonna read it. So I said, oh, you need me here. And, communications was not what governments did, they thought I was crazy. "You wanna talk to people?" and I had covered city commission meetings for the local newspaper for several years, so I was used to going to different local communities and covering 'em and So I said, "Well, why don't you give the press a press packet that has all the information so they don't have to call you all the time?"

Spinelle: There are press packets handed out in my township: they usually include a meeting agenda, copies of presentations that are being given, and other documents the council might be discussing. It can be very helpful when you're covering local government. And something small—like putting together a press packet so the local reporters have all the information they need—can build trust. Linda worked at the city for 12 years, and then in 2000 came up with an idea: she wanted to make the city government more transparent to not only the press, but all of Decatur's residents. She created a program to teach residents what their local government does day in and day out.

Harris: People usually come out when they're perturbed about something or there's a hot topic that they want to know about or complain about. Very rarely do people come and say, Hey, I'm so glad you're here. Which is one of the reasons why we wanted to create Decatur 101 because there were so many good things happening that people just didn't know.

Spinelle: Decatur 101 is a free, seven week course hosted by the City of Decatur. Residents come to City Hall once a week and learn how the city works – and why it's a level of government that they can really be a part of.

Harris: Well, and to show people what local government does because they really can get involved and affect the decisions of local government very easily, much more so than state and federal. I mean, because we're all right here and it makes a difference. We started it to actually create informed and involved citizens and to put a face on government because you think of government as big, bad government, they don't care. But I knew the people and I knew they did care. I knew I cared. So we crafted this class about local government designed to inform people, but also to get them involved.

Spinelle: She wanted the participants of Decatur 101 to walk away feeling more connected to their town. Whether that's volunteering for local organizations, joining a council or committee, or telling their neighbors about what they learned in the class. Linda went all in to sell the idea of Decatur 101 to her colleagues, who were skeptical at first that residents would want to attend a class like this.

Harris: We had a pilot class cuz I had to talk all my friends into going, including my husband. And my husband is a baker, he baked brownies. And I didn't even think about snacks. And so everybody loved the snacks. And they said just bring some more snacks back! So he baked different snacks for each class, which he did, bless his heart, for 20 years.

Spinelle: All the work Linda and her baking husband put in paid off. Around 1,000 people in Decatur have gone through the class...including local journalist Dan Wisenhunt. Dan is the editor of Decaturish, a local news website. He was a little skeptical about what he'd get out of it, at first:

Dan Wisenhunt: I knew what it was, but I really didn't think it was for journalists. I thought it was for the people that live there. I mean, I live there too, but I think they wanted to kind of show me a little bit about how they operate.

Spinelle: But Dan was just starting his website, and he attended because he thought it might help him cover the area, if he knew all the players working for city government.

Wisenhunt: Too often governments are pretty opaque. They don't want you to know who's making key decisions about what's going on, who the players are, who has access to the levers of power. And Decatur isn't that. Now, whether they're hiding in plain sight or something, I guess you could debate that. But I think anything that promotes civic engagement and education about how local government works is inherently a good thing.

Spinelle: Dan did walk away with a lot of contacts that he used in his reporting the following years.

Wisenhunt: I have to say it's about 50% PR, 50% informative.

Spinelle: And this PR element is part of Linda's original goal. She wanted to demystify what local government does so citizens feel more empowered to get involved. Also, to introduce Decatur residents to city employees and leaders.

Harris: Who are these people? And you'll find that the people who work here are very passionate about what they do. I mean, the storm water guy, he loves stormwater. You just never would know it if you hadn't heard him talk. So that was a good thing that happened that was unexpected, getting the folks who work for the city to talk to people, because they're so used to people coming and being mad at 'em that they would say, "They're not gonna be mad at me?" I'm like no, "They're going to like you!" And then once they start talking about stormwater and you see the passion, it's like, "Wow, this person really cares!"

Spinelle: During the pandemic, Decatur 101 couldn't meet in person, so the city made YouTube videos to get some of the same information across. Even in these videos you can hear the passion the employees have for their jobs and their communities.

[YouTube Video](#): Good morning Decatur 101. This is Gregory White with the City of Decatur. I am currently the Director of our Active Living Division. I've been in this city for 27 wonderful years. Today I'm going to give you a wonderful tour of the Ebster Recreation community which is better known as "the bottom..."

Spinelle: The Youtube videos the city published during the pandemic gave people tours of the various city facilities. But when the class meets in person, Linda and her colleagues also lead residents through various exercises.

Harris: We do a hundred pennies exercise. How would you spend your city tax dollar? And we literally give people a hundred pennies and they spend the city tax dollar, but the first thing I have them do is take out 68 cents.

Spinelle: Taking out 68 cents represents how much of a tax dollar goes to the local schools.

Harris: And whatever's left, the 30 something pennies, is all they have left. That's what they can spend on all the city services. And the whole point was to show folks how much of your tax's dollars go to the school system and how much we do as a city with a small amount of money. And it worked.

Spinelle: Linda also wants residents to understand how the city arrives at decisions that residents might not agree with.

Harris: We do a lot a thing called MythBusters in our economic development class. like the myth is there's too much development, or the myth is there's too much parking. And we showed people what choices we have to make. So if you're gonna do this, this happens. And we had somebody in the class who was very much against a new development and it was great to hear his voice. We do a tour and show people how it came to be and why, I mean, why this development is here. I think once people understand the why, they understand it better. He never really liked the development but we listened to him and he had an important point of view. We make hard decisions sometimes. We had our glass recycling was gonna go way up and so do we keep glass recycling, do we not? And we put it out to the Decatur 101 group as an exercise, "Tell us what you think." And they sat around in three groups and talked about the pros and the cons and if we did this and then this. And they really liked doing those real things that we grapple with. And that surprised me.

Spinelle: Decatur 101 has also served as an introduction class for people interested in running for local office.

Harris: Several of our commissioners took Decatur 101, and it doesn't matter how you get involved, it's just that you get involved, some way.

Spinelle: One of those city leaders is Mayor Patti Garrett.

Patti Garrett: So we moved to Decatur in 2001, and I believe I took Decatur 101 in about 2005, I think. So I really wanted to find out more about how the city was run. I enjoyed living in this city. I'd been active in the neighborhood association. And I'd also just heard a lot about Decatur of 101 and that it was a real opportunity to participate in my community and learn more about how it works.

Spinelle: It served as a sort of primer on the city before she ran for mayor.

Garrett: I was really impressed at how wide ranging it was that we learned about every department within the city and how they operated individually, but also how they sort of came together and worked as a whole. I remember learning about the budget

and where my tax dollars went, and that's a lesson certainly I took away that I think our community is always interested in.

Spinelle: Now that she's mayor, she sees Decatur 101 as a powerful recruiting tool. It's one way to get new people involved in city government.

Garrett: I will say that now that I'm one of the people that interviews people for boards and commissions, one of the things that we do ask about is, "Have you taken Decatur 101?" We see a lot of mistrust, I think, in government, and what can we do as a local government to instill trust in our community, and to have the support of our community?

Spinelle: The program has been going on for more than 23 years, and it's still popular and well attended by people in Decatur. Almost every year they have a waitlist. Yes, some attendees run for city commission, or even mayor, but Linda says what she's most proud of is when she hears from residents about the "aha" moments they have about how their city works.

Harris: My favorite comment was, "It makes it so much easier to write that tax check." And I was like, "Oh, I'm gonna frame this!"

Spinelle: Dan, the local journalist, and longtime Decatur resident himself, appreciates that more people in his town understand the government he covers. And he thinks this empowers residents to use government in better ways.

Wisenhunt: I think people understanding how it works makes it more likely that they can make an effective meaningful change down the road because they'll understand how it works in the first place. You can't change anything if you don't understand how it works.

Spinelle: The class has also become a social event that knits Decatur neighborhoods together.

Harris: A lot of what people talk about is meeting their neighbors or talking to people they didn't know already. I mean, we have people taking this as date nights. That is hilarious! You're coming here for a date night, or two women would do it and then go out and drink wine afterwards. It became a fun, fun thing and that makes me smile.

Spinelle: Linda will retire from the city manager's office at the end of 2023 and hand off the program to her colleagues. She's done a lot in her tenure at the city. But she says starting this class and seeing the impact it made on Decatur residents is what she's most proud of.

Harris: I'm sure I will be easily forgotten, but I don't think Decatur 101 will, at least to the people who took it and to the people who are carrying it on. So, I mean, to me it's that whole thing about being informed and involved in building community. That people see the importance of building community and are part of a community. It'll be interesting to see what happens next.

Spinnelle: I've lived in State College for 15 years, but it wasn't until I got involved in the traffic situation that I really thought a lot about how my town council worked. Attending traffic advisory meetings made me aware of how much thought goes into something as simple as a stop sign. Like Linda said, being informed and involved made me feel so much closer to my community. This season, we'll be sharing more stories of folks empowered by knowledge and gumption to make their mark through local politics. This is When The People Decide Season 2: democracy at the local level.

Spinnelle: When the People Decide is produced by LWC Studios for the McCourtney Institute for Democracy at Penn State. The podcast is reported and hosted by me, Jenna Spinnelle. Our producer is Claire McInerney (MACK-in-urn-ee). Paulina Velasco edited this episode. Erica Huang (WONG) mixed this episode. Fact checking by Fendall Fulton. Special thanks to Linda Harris, Dan Wisenhunt and Patti Garrett for participating in this episode. And Lowell Brillante for the tape sync. Audio Clips of "Welcome to Decatur" and the "Decatur 101" digital tours are from the City of Decatur's Youtube channel.

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