



## Winning the democracy lottery

When public officials embark on efforts to incorporate more civic input in city decisions, they are often hamstrung by inefficient means that favor the loudest voices in a room. But more people want a say in their local government; they just need the right opportunity.

For Petaluma, California, it was something called the "democracy lottery." In this episode, we explore what that is and the power that comes from letting the community deliberate in a public way. Hear from Petaluma's city manager and one of the residents who was part of the fairgrounds panel.

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Jenna Spinelle: My family loves to play the lottery. Like really loves it. You might even say it's the closest thing we have to a family pastime. When I was a kid, my grandmother's husband would write down the Pennsylvania lottery daily numbers in a notebook after they were drawn each day. He would pore over that notebook looking for patterns or clues about what the next big jackpot might be. Every holiday card I get from my parents has at least one scratch off ticket in it. At our most recent family dinner, my brother and sister in law put them at everyone's place setting!

I enjoy playing the big Powerball jackpot or scratching off an instant ticket as much as the next person. But I think my family loves the lottery so much, because it represents hope. The chance of winning represents a way out. A literal ticket to something bigger and better for their lives. And isn't that what we all want on some level?

Today's episode is about a whole other type of lottery. The payout is not as life changing as tens of millions of dollars, but instead a better understanding of your community. Today I want to introduce you to the democracy lottery.

I'm Jenna Spinelle, and this is When The People Decide. A show about how everyday people are shaping democracy. The democracy lottery is a tool local governments can use when trying to get feedback from their residents. In 2022, the city of Petaluma, California held one of these lotteries for the first time. Before we get into how they used the democracy lottery, let me tell you a little bit about the city.

Petaluma is a city in Northern California with around 60,000 residents. A majority of the residents, 75 percent, are white, and 21 percent are Latino.

Peggy Flynn: We are the southernmost city in Sonoma County.

Spinelle: That's Peggy Flynn, the city manager of Petaluma.

Flynn: We're about an hour away from San Francisco and we definitely have the Bay Area influence, but then we have a very rich agrarian history. We were the egg capital of the world at the turn of last century.

Spinelle: There still is a lot of agriculture in the area. Wine Grapes and dairy are two of the biggest crops produced in this part of California. Petaluma sits right next to a river that you can paddleboard on and the downtown is filled with charming, old buildings. Many of those downtown storefronts are restaurants and wineries. Here's a clip from KRCB North Bay Public Media.

KCRB Clip: "Today, Petaluma is a haven for entertainment. And turn of the century Petalumens also enjoyed a good show. A hundred years ago, this was the state theater..."

Spinelle: In 2019, when Peggy became Petaluma's city manager, she immediately learned that one of the first projects she would need to take on, was what to do with the city's fairgrounds.

Flynn: It's 55 acres. It's in the center of our city. It's got a speedway that used to be the old horse track. So it's been around for a long time.

Spinelle: For the last 50 years, the city of Petaluma leased this land to the state for one dollar each year. The main use of it is an annual five day fair.

Flynn: And then during the rest of the year, it has a property management function, but for a variety of commercial operations. So doggy daycare and paintball and a preschool, and we've got a charter school there and we've got an auction and we've got the speedway. So there's a lot of activities going on, but a variety of commercial operations as well.

Spinelle: This 50 year lease for these fairgrounds is up in 2024. The city has owned the land, but didn't get to dictate how it was used. That changes, once the lease is over. So in her role as city manager, Peggy found herself leading the decision of what to do with the fairgrounds. She soon realized many people in the public were finding out about this change for the first time.

Flynn: I need to start from the beginning because the conversation and negotiations between the city and the fair had never been public. So there was a lot of misinformation, a lot of confusion, a lot of not understanding how things were going to go when the lease expires.

Spinelle: So when Petalumans started hearing that this lease was up, and that the city government was talking about what to do with the fairgrounds.

Flynn: There was concerns that the city would sell the property to a developer or the fair could no longer operate. There were people on the other side that were like, well, the fair gets to operate, you know, gets to control this property for a dollar a year. But yet we don't have public access outside of specific events and events that are pay to play, right? So it's not like they're free events.

Spinelle: She was seeing confusion among her neighbors, and also distrust. People were fearful they would lose the fair. Or the property would turn into something like a hotel or a shopping center. Peggy saw this moment of disconnect between the public and the city

as an opportunity to do something different. She didn't know right away what that would look like, but she did know what she didn't want it to look like.

Flynn: We could set up a community workshop, but guess who gets to be at those workshops? People that are retired, people that have childcare, that don't have language or other barriers to access.

Spinelle: Peggy says, when city governments do community engagement like that, it's often the loudest voices that get to share their opinions. The city isn't always making space for a variety of opinions to be heard. So Peggy wanted to create a way to hear from the entire community, not just the people who typically show up to give feedback.

Flynn: This property belongs to the residents. So how do we get that ownership and those voices to the table? I felt it was important. It's so hard to engage people in government as long as your garbage is picked up and you don't have potholes. And people are busy. It's also an equity thing. Some people have two jobs, some people don't have childcare. How do we get people's voices to the table and also feel ownership of the ultimate decision that council would need to make?

Spinelle: While she was mulling this over, Peggy attended a conference by the League of California Cities, an advocacy group for local governments. At one of the sessions she attended, she heard a talk by someone from a nonprofit called Healthy Democracy. The organization creates programs for local governments that bring more residents to the table. The speaker was sharing a public engagement strategy that was new to her. And she was excited as she listened to this presentation, because this type of engagement actually felt representative to Peggy.

Flynn: I had never heard about lottery selected panels or deliberative democracy. I just thought, oh my gosh, this is the missing piece of the pie.

Spinelle: This is how lottery selected panels work.

A city has a project that they want public input on. Rather than just relying on people to speak on the subject at a city council meeting or other traditional ways of public input, they create a more specialized panel of folks to give them feedback.

First, the city sends out invitations to a large portion of residents, inviting them to participate. Then, all the names are entered into a randomized lottery which picks residents to serve on the panel. Once that panel is selected, those residents work together to create suggestions for the city. The panel doesn't get to dictate the final decision for the project. Instead, they advise the city on resident desires and concerns for the issue at hand. It's a more intentional way of collecting community input.

That's in part because it attempts to reach out to people from different parts of the city, different racial groups, and different points of view to give more folks a chance to get on the panel. So, how did this work in Petaluma to decide what to do with the fairgrounds?

First, Peggy invited the non profit she met at that conference, Healthy Democracy, to come work with the city to make it happen. Healthy Democracy helped identify potential

panelists, send invitations, coordinate logistics and preparations for the meetings, and facilitate deliberations. In Petaluma, 10,000 residents got letters inviting them to put their names in the lottery—about a sixth of the city’s population.

Flynn: We also wanted to over sample for demographics that we haven't seen in previous city efforts. We wanted to hear more from our Latinx, from our youth, from our seniors, from our African American population, from our unsheltered population.

Spinelle: One of the people who got one of those 10,000 letters was Seely Umlaut.

Seely Umlaut: The envelope actually looked like you won a sweepstakes, it had this big star. As soon as I opened it up and really saw it, I got pretty excited. Every time I've gotten jury duty, I'm also excited.

Spinelle: Seely was new to Petaluma when she got the letter. She'd only lived there a year and a half. So she wasn't necessarily excited because she had strong feelings about what to do with the fairgrounds.

Umlaut: I'd say specifically this kind of thing was really exciting, the idea of being chosen specifically and having the whole process and the whole environment set up to really bring the input of citizens.

Spinelle: Seely responded that yes, she was interested in having her name put in the lottery. Healthy Democracy used an open-source software to generate a thousand potential panels, all random and demographically representative. At a public event, one 36-person panel was selected. Seely was in the selected panel.

Before the panel could get to work talking about the fairgrounds, there were some logistics that needed to be taken care of to kick off the process. Alex Renirie, who co-founded Healthy Democracy, says paying panelists for their time is necessary. In Petaluma, panelists were paid \$20 an hour, for 90 hours of work, spread out over a few months. Here's Alex.

Alex Renirie: So the financial reimbursement is also quite significant and, and we highlight that so that it isn't just an overwhelming thing, but it's really an invitation to take on a job in your community.

Spinelle: Panelists were also given resources if they needed child care, help with transportation to the meetings, or any technology they needed to participate. Another key part of the Petaluma process was that Healthy Democracy ran all of the meetings with the panelists. City Staff were not allowed to come to the meetings unless the panelists requested it. This allowed residents to brainstorm and share ideas without feeling pressure from any city representatives. Peggy, the city manager, told the panel all their work would focus on one question: what was their vision for the fairgrounds?

Flynn: How might we use the city's fairgrounds property to create the experiences, activities, resources, and places that our community needs and desires now and for the foreseeable future?

Spinelle: They weren't asked to figure out how to pay for any of their ideas. They just needed to give an informed recommendation to the city by the end of their deliberations. The panel

met for 12 days over two months. The first few meetings were about gathering information on how the fairgrounds could be used. Here's Peggy:

Flynn: They heard from housing advocates, they heard from the fairgrounds supporters. They heard from 4H and FFA. They heard from our Ag community. They heard from our sports community.

Spinelle: Seely and the other panelists listened to what all of these people wanted for the fairgrounds. And they also learned a lot—like the laws and regulations around what could be done with this space.

Umlaut: We were given binders and we had all the documentation online, everything that we received from the city—from all the stakeholders, all the speakers, any kind of public input—was all collected on the website so we could access it there. We just had a table set up, sort of a resource table, where you could at any time look at maps or surveys or any kind of information that we had gotten. It was a lot of information. If I didn't remember something someone else did and, and everyone kind of had their little things that they were focusing on.

Spinelle: The thing Seely focused on...

Umlaut: I was championing the agriculture incubator. I felt like the entire time, the most talked-about subject was agriculture, agriculture, agriculture. And it just felt like that was such a wonderful idea because it could incorporate the education for the 4H kids, it could be the local restaurants as far as farm to table kind of things...

Spinelle: Seely says balancing the needs and desires of so many people felt like a big responsibility.

Umlaut: Ultimately, we knew that we wouldn't be the deciders, but what we were doing was gonna have a very big impact on the people that would. And also just the responsibility of representing all those people that couldn't be there. There were some people who just really didn't want anything to change. And then there were other people who wanted everything to change. There were definitely some, some really hard moments with people feeling extremely emotional about it. And we would go around the circle and people would talk and their experiences of going there to the fair their entire lives. And they were really afraid that the fair wouldn't be there for their children and that the city was gonna put up a hotel.

Spinelle: After 12 meetings, the panel came up with three reports that laid out its recommendations for what to do with the fairgrounds. A few of the concrete suggestions that were supported by more than 90 percent of the panelists were: keeping the annual fair, using the fairgrounds for agriculture, using the space as an emergency evacuation center, and adding a year-round farmers market.

They also came up with more general guiding principles. These were broader criteria the panel wanted the city to follow as it made its final decision. The city council adopted eight of them. Including:

That the city continue working with residents. That they use the space as a community center, and that it devote some part of the land to agriculture. As of our recording this, in spring of 2023, Petaluma is still making its decision on what to do with the

fairgrounds. The current lease expires in December 2023. Regardless, Peggy is proud of her community's participation in the lottery-selected panel.

Flynn: The beautiful thing that I found from this panel was at the end of this long, long deliberation—and even though there wasn't a consensus on everything—there was a lot of agreement and there was so much respect for the other's opinion.

Spinelle: Seely says being involved in the process made her feel more connected to her new home.

Umlaut: It does really change your mind as far as when you learn all the specifics, you know, about what's actually on the table. It's not just what you want, but what all logistics, money, laws, all the people involved. With as divisive as things feel like with politics right now, to actually just have people being able to speak and have their voice not only heard, but actually impact what's going on in their local government is huge.

Spinelle: Even though she doesn't have a final say on what happens with the fairgrounds, Seely said spending so much time learning about this project showed her what she can do in her community.

Umlaut: I really want people to feel empowered that they do have a voice, and even if they think that what they have to offer doesn't mean anything. It really does. Even just one comment can change someone's mind. It leaning one way or another as far as making a decision or just no one had thought of that, some kind of important aspect that no one had thought about. So I just really encourage people to get involved in whatever way, not just sitting on the sidelines, but you are the democracy. Everybody's part of the government, and should feel a responsibility for themselves and for their community.

Spinelle: So many of us feel jaded about how our government works for us, and that's probably because we don't feel like we're a part of it. And I've seen this first hand. As a journalist, I've covered a lot of public meetings and seen the attempts at community engagement. The institutions may sometimes mean well, but emailing surveys or holding a weeknight meeting won't always give leaders a true representation of what their constituents need. And even the people who are able to participate in these more traditional outreach efforts don't always feel like their preferences are truly heard.

But the success of lottery selected panels like the one in Petaluma—or participatory budgeting, which we also talked about this season—shows that there are a lot more people who can and want to have a say in their local government's decisions. They just need the opportunity—that lucky lottery ticket—to share their perspective.

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 Spinelle. Our producer is Claire McInerney. Paulina Velasco edited this episode. Erica Huang mixed this episode. Fact checking by Fendall Fulton. Thank you to Peggy Flynn and Alex Renerie for participating in this episode. And thank you to Noor Al-Samari for recording Peggy's interview. Follow When the People Decide on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your favorite podcasts. This will make sure you get every upcoming episode—straight to your feeds. We're also at [thepeopledecide.show](https://thepeopledecide.show) and on social media @peopledecidepod. I'm Jenna Spinelle. Thanks for joining us.