

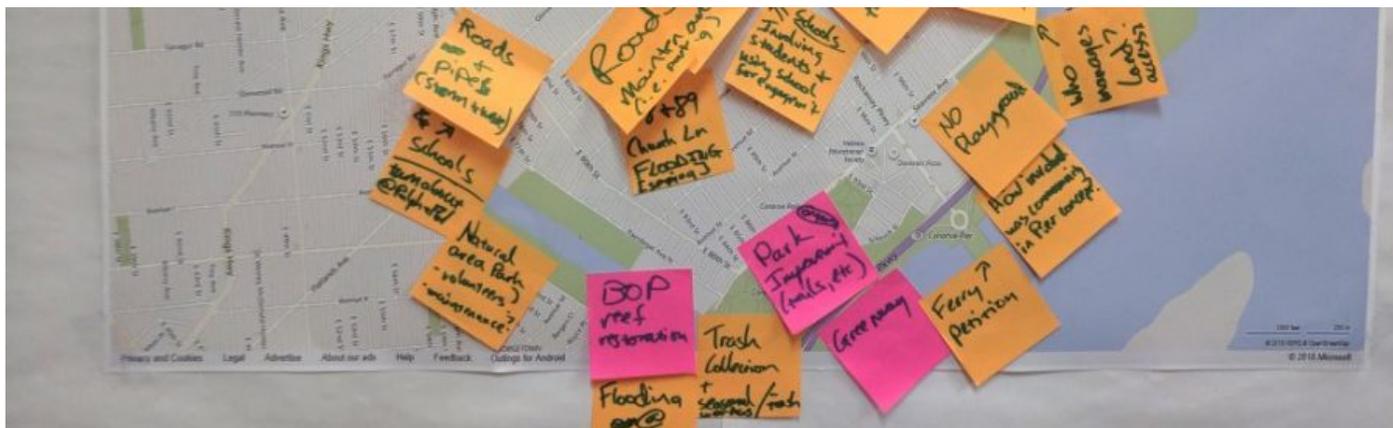
Witnessing Deliberative Democracy Up Close

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Categories : [Advisory Committees](#), [Community Partnerships](#), [Public Meetings](#)

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We are glad to share the reflections of Billi Jo Maynard, who worked at [Public Agenda](#) this past summer. Public Agenda is a national, non-partisan group which seeks to forge common ground and improve dialogue and collaboration among leaders and communities. They focus on critical issues, including education, health care and community engagement. The post originally appeared [here](#).

Here is Billi Jo's Post:

Throughout my undergraduate studies as a political science major, I have come across the subjects of **community engagement** and **public deliberation** before. However, until this meeting in Canarsie, I had never had the privilege to witness them firsthand.

Late on a Monday evening in July, roughly 30 people gathered at St. Alban's Episcopal Church to discuss the Brooklyn neighborhood of Canarsie. Canarsie is a culturally vibrant community that for decades has welcomed many immigrants from the Caribbean. The participants at the meeting had come together to address a range of environmental and economic challenges facing their neighborhood, especially the long-term impacts of Superstorm Sandy and attempts to prepare for future disasters. Throughout my undergraduate studies as a political science major, I have come across the subjects of community engagement and public deliberation before. However, until this

meeting in Canarsie, I had never had the privilege to witness them firsthand.

Several things surprised me throughout this meeting, but one thing in particular stood out to me. Before this meeting, I had the common misconception of thinking that all people who attend community engagement functions come because they are angry about something and they want to make a change. To my most pleasant surprise, **the community members of Canarsie expressed a deep love for their community**. This is not to say that everyone believed that Canarsie was a perfect place. In fact, there were several community problems addressed throughout the meeting that all individuals seemed to be in consensus on, such as the need for a central community center and more accessible community information. However, the community members seemed less angered by these problems, and more motivated by a desire to see their community thrive and grow.

At this time in American society, it is easy to feel disenchanting with the whole idea of community engagement. It seems as if the division we feel on politics will hinder any progress we hope to make whether it is on a large or a small scale. However, after witnessing the community members of Canarsie come together and find a common ground for everyone, **I feel much more optimistic about the progress we can make through community engagement**.

While the main point of the meeting was to develop an understanding of Canarsie and the problems that people in the community faced, I was also able to learn about all of the things people loved about this community. Simple things such as functioning transportation systems and quiet streets were mentioned multiple times. **What stood out to me the most though, was the feeling of “home” everyone said they had of Canarsie**. The Canarsie I read about on paper, and the Canarsie that I got to witness firsthand are two completely different places. One woman even said, **“People have a deep sense of ownership here in Canarsie.”**