

ADDRESSING YOUR LOCAL COMMUNITY

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHATTANOOGA CIVICS

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One thing that distributists are often asked is how we can begin to move toward a more distributist society. What are things that we can do now, in our current political and economic environment, to at least nudge society in what we consider to be a better direction. A lot of our response has been about how to do this economically; like supporting local businesses and using a credit union rather than a bank. That is good as far as it goes, but we must also address these questions politically. What steps can we take to help society as a whole to become more localist, to encourage our local government to address local issues and hold them accountable for doing so, and to encourage people in our local community to be engaged in the local political government and its activities?

Enter Nathan Bird and Chattanooga Civics. Chattanooga Civics is a local resource created to help the citizens of Chattanooga know what is going on in their city and county governments so they can be informed about what their local governments are doing and what they can do about it. As it says on the About section of the web site, “When you hear someone talk about local government what comes to mind? You might think about taxes, schools, policing, roads, or even something as mundane as trash collection. But do you wonder how these aspects of government are managed? How are tax rates set? Who exactly oversees the police? Who determines the school budget? How can we, as citizens, stay informed and make our voice heard? If you’ve been looking for answers to these questions you’re in the right place.” I reached out to Nathan and he took the time to answer some questions about this effort.

Q: In our society, it seems to be assumed that local government is not effective and incompetent. As a result, people look to the federal government or the state government to address problems. What made you decide to try and address things at the local level?

This project started in 2020, and there were a couple things that really made it clear to me how important local government can be. The first was COVID. We had all this information being handed out at the national level, but all the implementation was at the local level. Was your county issuing mask mandates? How successful was vaccine rollout in your city? Did you ever experience an actual “lockdown”? COVID was a national issue that played out very differently depending not just on which state you lived in, but which city or town. Similarly, the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020 sparked a national conversation about policing. But again, this is a national issue that plays itself out locally. Police budgets and policy are set at the city or county level. There are more issues like this that we often talk about nationally but require local action: affordable housing, sustainability,

transportation policy, I could go on. But what I saw in my hometown (and I think this is pretty typical) was a lack of easily accessible and digestible information about local government. I didn't even know who was in charge of making some of these decisions, much less what steps were being taken to address them. So I set out to create a platform that provided easier access to this information. It started as a podcast and has evolved to include a newsletter which summarizes local government issues each week.

Q: What kinds of things that impact daily life can local government address?

For most people you start interacting with local government as soon as you leave your house. Do you walk? Then you depend on local government to keep the sidewalks maintained. Do you ride your bike? Then you depend on local government to provide safe biking paths. Do you drive? Then you depend on local government to keep the roads paved and the traffic signals timed. But there are more complex issues too. Zoning is, in my opinion, one of the most important issues a city can manage. It has all sorts of impacts on housing affordability, traffic patterns, what kinds of businesses you have in a given area, and ultimately what kind of density you have and what kind of property taxes are required to sustain maintenance.

Q: What were your biggest setbacks or frustrations in getting Chattanooga Civics going and what did you find the most helpful in overcoming them?

Honestly, getting the podcast started was the easiest part. I did everything on a shoestring budget. I bought a used digital microphone, downloaded Audacity for editing, and built my website on Google Sites. It's all very "home brew", but it's gone pretty well. The barrier to entry for podcasting is just so low. I expected it would be harder to get guests, but actually nearly everyone is super excited to come on the show and talk about what they do. Now that might vary depending on the size and culture of a given city, but in Chattanooga I've had no problem getting guests and the list of people I still need to interview just keeps getting longer.

The hardest part has really been making people aware of the podcast and interested in the material. I still haven't figured out the best way around that. Local government just isn't a priority for most people. I try and make the case every chance I get, but it only really happens a few people at a time. Really the most helpful thing is to find out where people are already talking about local government and building off that and reacting to those conversations. Chattanooga has a very active subreddit, so I go there to let people know about the show, get ideas for future episodes, and get feedback. It's definitely the most engaged community I've found so far.

Q: How effective is local citizen involvement in changing things through local government?

It's more effective than doing nothing. There are a lot of road blocks to effecting change, especially at a grass roots level, but it's no different than advocating at the state or federal level. It takes a lot of sustained work. It takes organization and patience. And in a lot of ways it's more fun, more interesting, and easier, because you can organize with neighbors, you can meet your local representatives in person or even go address them on the record at a city council meeting.

Q: What are the realistic expectations people should have regarding making changes?

Change is going to be slow. Everything has to go through committees, public comment sessions, legal review, etc. So be patient, be willing to compromise, but don't let up. You have to keep the pressure up, sometimes for years, so it helps to prioritize and figure out which issues are most important to you. If you try and tackle everything at once you'll get burned out pretty quickly.

Q: What ways can members of the local community get more involved outside of running for office?

I got started by joining my neighborhood association. It's not an HOA, we don't have any legal power. It's just a bunch of neighbors get together once a month to discuss problems and solutions in the area, announce events, and learn more about what's going on in the city. Our city council representative comes to the meetings as often as she can, and other city officials will drop by occasionally to announce things that are happening in their departments that might affect us. These meetings don't have to be super formal, you just need a handful of people who care. I recommend everyone try and join an existing association or start your own.

Q: What have you found to be effective ways to get members of the local community more involved?

That's the big question! It's really hard to get people involved. Having more accessible information certainly helps, and that's the goal of Chattanooga Civics, but ultimately it comes down to convincing people that local government is important and that every voice has the capacity to create change. So there's no single answer that I've found, but I think the most helpful thing is to find an issue people care about and then connect it to the local level. And I've found that nearly every issue is influenced by local policies in some form or fashion.

Q: What recommendations do you have for anyone who wants to start doing something similar to what you do?

There's a bit of baseline knowledge required. You have to learn the structure of your local government. Every city and town is slightly different in how powers are distributed, so read your "founding document" (usually a charter) to understand how your local government works in the broadest sense. Find out who sits in your local legislative body, start reading local news, and see if you can access meeting minutes or recordings. Just familiarize yourself with the process. That's really the foundation. Do that for a couple weeks and you'll have a good understanding of who to talk to and what questions to ask. From there it's really up to you what direction you want to go in and what issues you want to focus on.



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