

Let's Build Our Future

Forum Discussion Guide



A nationwide initiative for communities to talk together, think together, and take actions to shape their community's future



**NATIONAL ISSUES
FORUMS INSTITUTE**

What is...

What's Next, America?

“What’s Next, America?” is a nationwide initiative to support communities in identifying challenges and opportunities and in planning actions based on their own ideas for moving forward. As they talk together, set directions, and take a range of actions to address their local concerns, communities across the nation are charting a course for our country’s future.

“What’s Next, America?” has been developed by the National Issues Forums Institute and a broad—and growing—coalition of partners from nonprofit, educational, philanthropic, governmental, and faith-based organizations.

About Us

The National Issues Forums Institute is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization with a mission to equip, empower, and mobilize people to use deliberation to take action for the public good. Learn more at nifi.org.

Acknowledgements

“What's Next, America?” is informed by the deep insights and effective practices shared with the National Issues Forums Institute by colleagues around the country over the past four decades. Its structure and elements are based on the experiences and learnings of communities that participated in the West Virginia Center for Civic Life’s “What's Next, West Virginia?” and the David Mathews Center for Civic Life’s “What's Next, Alabama?”



What's Next, America?

As our nation turns 250, many Americans believe that the time is right for conversations that bring people together who might not normally talk and work together, conversations that will encourage fresh, innovative thinking and actions to emerge.

“What’s Next, America?” is designed to do just that— connect people who are already working to develop strong communities while bringing new people and new ideas into the mix.

The goal: to provide ways for people to talk and act together to improve their lives in answer to the hopeful question – “What’s Next, America?”

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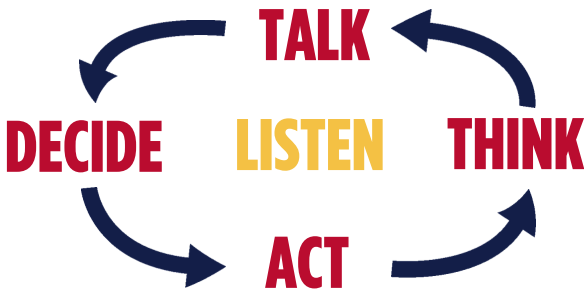
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The National Issues Forums Institute is launching “What’s Next, America?” to provide tools and resources for Americans to address challenges or build on opportunities in their neighborhoods, communities, campuses, and more. These resources will help communities talk together about issues they care about, set directions for moving forward, and take actions to improve their lives and the lives of others.

This discussion guide is intended to help you learn more about your community, connect with work that is already underway, bring new ideas and people into the conversation, set directions for actions, and work together to improve the place you live.



The purpose of the discussions is to work with others to:

- Discuss important public needs, problems, issues, and opportunities
- Consider differing points of view.
- Set directions for actions.
- Work together to make it happen.
- All while strengthening your civic muscle!

What's Next America?

A Nation of Communities Taking Action Together

Across the country, since before our nation was founded, Americans have been working together to solve problems they faced in their communities. From everyday citizens participating in New England town meetings to the speeches and sit-ins of the Civil Rights Movement, communities have proven they can stick together and work together – even in the most challenging of times.

A 250-year-old American Tradition

On the eve of the American Revolution, colonists faced differences in background, religion, and custom, and they were deeply divided about whether or not to break from Great Britain. Yet, through this turmoil, through conversations and debates, in taverns and around kitchen tables, colonists talked and decided together in their communities what they wanted for their future. Many people were restricted in that time from fully participating in this political decision-making, and much progress remained to be made on the journey toward ever-greater liberty and justice. But those early conversations proved that Americans were already committing to set out, together, on that journey.

Now, 250 years later, our nation is larger, our diversity is greater, and our problems seem sometimes even more complex. For one, we hear so much these days about how divided we are that it can seem especially difficult to decide and act on common goals together. On top of that, many Americans find themselves working long hours or multiple jobs just to make ends meet, or caring for children or other family members. These kinds of circumstances can make it difficult for many to find the time to get involved locally. But talking and working together as Americans in our communities is a part of who we are. The story of the United States is one of a people who have, despite challenges and disagreements, chosen – again and again – to keep building together.

The Ongoing Work of **Our Democracy**

Conditions are ripe to carry on this tradition. First, research suggests that we're not as sharply divided on many issues as we are often told. And we see even less division – and more trust – at the local level, in our communities. This means that the renewal of democracy can begin not far away in Washington, D.C., but right where we live, where we can see our neighbors as partners in shaping our community's future.

When we do encounter differences – politically, racially, economically or otherwise – most Americans say we want to connect across divides—but not just through conversation. We want to work together. In one national study, 74% of respondents said they'd like to partner with someone different from them to achieve a goal that improves their community. Yet fewer than 20% had done so in the past year. The biggest barrier? Not time or interest, but lack of opportunity.

“What's Next, America?” offers an opportunity for more Americans to join forces with people in their communities to make decisions and take local action. In this guide you'll find questions designed to spark honest reflection, careful listening, and collaborative action. You'll explore not only where we differ, but where we meet. When we deliberate, decide, and work together, we help shape a future worth building together.



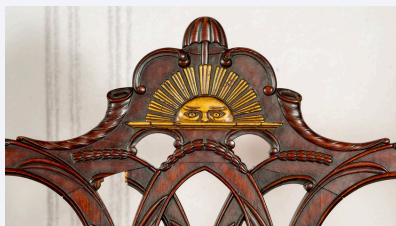
WHAT'S NEXT, AMERICA?

A Recurring Question in Our Great American Experiment

When the delegates to the Constitutional Convention finished their work in 1787, Benjamin Franklin pointed to the carving of a sun on the back of George Washington's chair.

"I have often looked at that [sun] behind the president without being able to tell whether it was rising or setting," he said. "But now I have the happiness to know that it is a rising, and not a setting, sun." That small moment is a powerful metaphor for a question that each generation of Americans has asked itself: Will the sun continue to rise on this great experiment in self-government?

This guide invites you to join with neighbors and community members to help shape that ongoing experiment. Its practical tools were designed to support your community and thousands more across the country in turning talk into action and charting the future course of your local area and our nation.



Now it's your turn. The next several pages provide tools to help you discuss, decide, and act together with people in your community.

Let the discussion begin!

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

This is a discussion about the state of your community—where it is now and where it has been. It's a chance to take stock of its strengths, to identify needs, and to build a foundation for future work together.

A good, thriving future can mean different things to different people.

- It can mean having a good job, a house, enough money to make ends meet, and more to set aside.
- It can mean living in a place with laws and policies that give everyone a fair chance to succeed.
- It can mean having friends and being in a position to give to others.
- It can mean having a strong cultural heritage, living in a beautiful landscape, feeling content with life.
- So many ways to think about a better future . . . It's up to you and other community members to set directions for what you envision.

- 1** How would we describe our community today? What factors led to where we are now?
- 2** How has our past shaped the community we are today?
- 3** What would we want to retain or recapture from the past?
- 4** What are the greatest strengths of our community?
- 5** What are our community's greatest needs?
- 6** What information do we need to move forward? How will we gather it? Who else needs to be involved?

YOUR NOTES

What is surprising you? What new information are you learning? What new ideas are you considering?

MORE NOTES

What is surprising you? What new information are you learning? What new ideas are you considering?

For our next discussion...

We'll be talking about where we want to go. Think about this question: What does the community you want to have look like?

Invite others to be a part of the conversation?

Where do we want to go?

During the last conversation the group identified the community's greatest needs. At the start of today's conversation you'll review what the group came up with.

This is a discussion about the options for making positive changes in your community – a challenge your community is facing and/or opportunities your community can build on. You'll have a chance to consider different perspectives, think deeply about potential actions, and set directions together.

This conversation involves thinking through some of the needs or challenges you discussed in the last meeting and the options that are available to you for taking positive steps—thinking deeply about them, deciding if they're manageable, considering their impacts, and finding out which ideas make people so committed that they want to roll up their sleeves and get to work.

- 1** Of the challenges and opportunities that we have identified, which one should we prioritize working on first?
- 2** How might we go about addressing this challenge or building on this opportunity?
- 3** What are the greatest obstacles we might face if we work toward any of these options?
- 4** What different perspectives do we have about the challenge or opportunity we want to work on?
- 5** What existing strengths can we build on?

NOTE: Your group can work through questions 1-5 above for each challenge or opportunity that you'd like to focus on.

Take a look back at the priorities you have considered

Which ones address time-sensitive or urgent needs? Which ones are most doable in terms of available time, energy, and resources?

1. List your ideas

2. Which ideas have most impact and urgency?

3. Which ideas are most doable?

NOTES

What is surprising you? What new information are you learning? What new ideas are you considering?

For our next discussion...

We'll be talking about how we'll get to where we want to go. Think about this question: What are our priorities for action?

Invite others to be part of the discussion!

The conversation moves to... **Action Planning**

How will we get there?

Now for the exciting part—how will you go about achieving your goals?

It's time to strategize, anticipate problems, think about the places and people where you can go to tap into support, and consider the steps that will move you forward. If you can't do everything at once, where do you start?

CHART YOUR PATH FORWARD

Use the roadmap to turn ideas to action

1. Our Direction
What are we working toward?

2. Our Strengths
Who and what can help us?

3. Our Challenges
What obstacles might arise?

4. Our Goal
What will success look like?

- 1 What actions will have the greatest impact?
- 2 What trade-offs are part of the actions we've identified?
- 3 What actions are most doable in the near future?
- 4 What actions require effort over a longer period of time?
- 5 What challenges do we anticipate as we move forward?

Notes to yourself

What is surprising you? What new information are you learning? What new ideas are you considering?

Moving to action

Things to consider for the next session

What will your role be in addressing the needs your group has identified?

Who else needs to be involved?

What will you do to invite others?



What's Next? It's up to YOU!

Planning for Local Action

Many communities organize a community-wide gathering to plan next steps for the actions they most want to undertake. Often called an “Action Summit,” this next step provides an opportunity to review the key insights and reach out to others to be a part of taking action in your community. For a deeper look at planning and hosting an action summit, look here.

Before the “Action Summit”

- Summarize key concerns and directions that emerged in your discussions
- List action ideas that had the greatest support
- Continue outreach to involve others

During the “Action Summit”

- Prioritize actions
- Develop local action groups
- Make plans to stay connected

You'll find more information about developing a *What's Next America?* initiative in your community in this planning guide:

1 Planning your discussions

2 Spreading the word

3 Leading the discussions

4 Moving to action

Staying connected

In order to connect your ideas and work to the rest of the country, please stay in touch! We want to develop opportunities to learn from one another.

- Visit whatsnextamerica.com for resources and updates
- Sign up for the “What’s Next, America?” [email list](#)
- If you’d be willing to be interviewed about your local efforts, contact us at cfernando@nifi.org
- Join others online as we host periodic discussions, workshops, and trainings to share local ideas and learn from others across the country
- Sign up for our newsletter for updates and stories about what is happening across the country

Helping “What’s Next, America?” grow

- Invite others to participate
- Find “What’s Next, America?” on Facebook and Insta
- Create your own local social media pages
- Share national and local posts with others
- Use our hashtag: [#whatsnextamerica](#)



WHAT'S NEXT, AMERICA?

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Thank you to the community members across the country using these resources to ask "What's Next, America?"

Learn more at whatsnextamerica.com.



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