

Let's Talk Alaska

Let's Talk Alaska (LTAK) is the result of over 10 years of work that was originally funded in 2006 by a \$15,000 research contract to Alaska Common Ground from the Kettering Foundation. The purpose was to create what Kettering called a Public Policy Institute in Alaska to host and facilitate citizen deliberation as part of the National Issues Forums Network. Let's Talk Alaska is the evolutionary result of that effort, and is now working with the Alaska Humanities Forum to apply for funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities to expand into a statewide network of library based civic dialogue. The following excerpts from an LTAK draft proposal describe what we hope to achieve:

- Enhance the role of libraries as centers for community engagement,
- Create the opportunity for all citizens to talk and be heard,
- Help citizens develop the skills with which they can create a public voice to inform and direct their elected officials, and
- Create a more engaged democracy in Alaska.

Our vision is a thriving democratic society in Alaska where citizens come together to find common purpose by sharing their needs, values, and hopes for the future in respectful dialogues.

We will do this by creating a statewide network based on the LTAK model developed over the past 10 years with the support of Alaska Common Ground, the Kettering Foundation, and the Anchorage (Alaska) Public Library. It has the following elements:

1. Community focused dialogues and deliberations
2. Community library based
3. Small groups of 10 to 20 participants
4. Agendas designed to maximize participant engagement with time frames of from 1 and ½ to 2 and ½ hours.
5. Participant exploration of what topics mean in terms of their needs, values, and hopes
6. Discussion Guides that use questions to maximize participant freedom to address how topics are relevant to their needs, values, and hopes.
7. Ground Rules/Agreements set by participants
8. Facilitators trained in methods for managing the time, the topic, and the talking with minimal intrusion.

The LTAK model depicted in the attached graphic, positions dialogue as an experience in which citizens build trusting relationships by sharing their needs, values, and hopes. Trusting relationships make possible the deliberations in which citizens come to agreement on a common cause for political action. As John Dewey explained, “The clear consciousness of a communal life, in all its implications, constitutes the idea of democracy.”

Since 2012 LTAK has designed, hosted and facilitated:

- ◆ 27 small-group dialogues in 6 communities across the state
- ◆ 4 demonstration dialogues at annual conventions of the Alaska Library Association
- ◆ Dialogues on the 4 voter initiatives and the oil tax referendum (9 in 5 communities) in 2014
- ◆ 10 dialogues on the fiscal gap in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Seward, Homer, and Soldotna using a discussion guide we wrote titled *Citizen Guide to Alaska’s Fiscal Crisis: Who Speaks for Community?*

Participants have praised the program and librarians have requested more.

We are currently planning dialogues in libraries located in Kodiak, Wasilla, Palmer, Big Lake, and Sutton on the *Fiscal Crisis: Who Speaks for Community?* Travel for these dialogues has been made possible by a grant from the Alaska Humanities Forum (AHF).

LTAK has been created with the support of Alaska Common Ground, the Anchorage Public Library, and the Kettering/NIFI network, of which it is a member. Many individuals have contributed, the most active of whom are: Bill Hall, Karen Hunt, Peg Tileston, Dick LaFever, Mia Oxley, Rayette Sterling, and Cliff Groh.