

# Preface

**T**HIS BOOK IS AN OUTGROWTH of a 1995 project to provide a grassroots organizing guide for the citizens of Vancouver, British Columbia. *The Citizen's Handbook: A Guide to Building Community in Vancouver* arose out of a call for more meaningful citizen participation from many quarters. Many ordinary citizens wanted to know how they could effect changes in their neighborhoods by working with local government.

Experts were also calling for more citizen involvement. Around the same time five local task force reports appeared covering a range of issues – health care; climate change; child protection; safety; urban landscape; family services; and the environment and the economy. Despite the range of issues, all the reports came to the same conclusion: To make real progress on large-scale social problems we need far more citizen participation; more people involved in public life; more people willing to step beyond the bounds of their private property and the private world of friends and family. In other words, we need strong democracy; deep, broad, citizen involvement in public interest issues as a regular – if small – part of everyday life.

But there was a problem. There was a great gap between what the task force reports called for and what was actually happening. In Vancouver, only a handful of people were involved in local issues on a regular basis. The city did public participation projects when it felt necessary, but these always involved short-term, “hit and run” participation. In most cases, it was done to garner support for initiatives devised by bureaucrats. While city bureaucrats claimed to be big fans of partnerships between citizens and government, they showed little interest in anything beyond tightly controlled citizen involvement as a way of managing public perceptions and containing dissent.

If people in Vancouver wanted to see more meaningful citizen involvement, so did residents of many other cities. To make the handbook more widely available a number of volunteers with the Vancouver Community Net produced a web version of *The Citizen's Handbook*. This version, now at [www.vcn.bc.ca/citizens-handbook](http://www.vcn.bc.ca/citizens-handbook), remains one of the few

complete grassroots organizing guides available on the internet.

Like its precursor, *The Troublemaker's Teaparty* is meant for small citizens groups with little or no funding. Most of the literature on citizen action ignores small citizens groups and focuses on larger, funded nonprofits with staff.

*The Troublemaker's Teaparty* extends *The Citizen's Handbook* to include material that is missing from most manuals on grassroots organizing and community development. For instance, most ignore the hidden rocks and whirlpools that frequently wreck the plans of ordinary citizens new to public involvement. The beaming optimism of so many of these books sets citizens up for failure and inevitable retreat back into private life. This volume identifies the rocks and whirlpools and suggests practical ways to avoid them.

This book also addresses the broader dimensions of public action. While it continues to emphasize local improvement, it contains new material to help guide citizen action focused on issues affecting a larger commons, and those affecting people living in other places. Chapters 1 to 6 focus on place-based community action, while Chapters 7 to 10 shift the focus to public interest action that transcends place. The book contains these additions:

- A range of tactics spanning cooperation, negotiation, campaigning, and confrontation, and when to use them
- More material on small group dynamics, because small groups must be able to manage themselves effectively without the help of professionals
- Tips on the best ways to nudge government; while democratic governments may behave badly or incompetently, they are still the best allies of citizens interested in public interest issues
- A large collection of community-building projects citizens can use to build local community and enhance social place
- New ideas for getting noticed (Access to the mainstream media has always been a problem for grassroots groups. Now there are ways to bypass corporate control of the media.)
- A guide to strategic thinking
- Answers to the basic questions of organizing:  
*How do we get others involved?*  
*How do we respect different views, but work cooperatively?*  
*How do we decide what is important?*  
*How do we define actions that will achieve what is important?*  
*How do we find necessary time and resources?*  
*How can we contribute modestly and still make a difference?*
- A summary of research into what works for social movements

I have tried to avoid entering into a polemic on topical issues such as globalization, poverty, and environmental protection, which dilutes so many books on citizen action. I assume you understand your issue and are trying to figure out how to make progress.

I have also tried to eliminate unnecessary words, because activists would rather be acting than reading. Because *The Teaparty* is a manual, it lacks the repetition needed for skimming. The downside of this is that some readers will miss essentials by treating it like a long-winded work of non-fiction. *The Teaparty* should not be skimmed or read cover to cover, but rather consulted selectively according to what is happening at the moment.

Many thanks to Karen Hemmingson, Paula Carr, David Beers, Chris Warren, and Don Alexander for commenting on the manuscript.

Finally, I should say that this book is less the product of my expertise than of the expertise of many others. Think of it as a distillation of what we know about citizen action from the very best troublemakers.