

Overview: Civics for the Community

For the New Jersey State League of Municipalities'
Innovation in Governance Awards Program application

In Highland Park, we've seen repeatedly that residents don't always make the fine distinctions between activities on the state, county, and municipal level. When a new mandate or increased cost affects their lives, and they feel unprepared for the change, residents often get frustrated and may not know the most effective ways to make their voice heard.

In the interest of fostering a more informed and engaged citizenry, in fall 2017 Highland Park started a series of workshops designed to inform residents about how state and local governments work and the best ways to interact with them. Titled "Civics for the Community," the series has thus far held four free and open to the public non-partisan events;

Be an Informed Voter: Learn about NJ State Government

Guest Speaker: Ingrid Reed, Retired Director - New Jersey Project at Eagleton Institute of Politics of Rutgers University

September 13, 2017

Government by Neighbors: How Does Local Government Work?

Guest Speaker: Marc Pfeiffer, Assistant Director – Local Government Research Center at the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, at Rutgers University

November 28, 2017

New Jersey Taxes: Everybody's Favorite Topic

Guest Speaker: John Whiten, Vice President – New Jersey Policy Perspective

January 17, 2018

Property Taxes: Why Are They Such a Problem?

Guest Speaker: Henry A. Coleman, Professor of Public Policy - Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, at Rutgers University

April 10, 2018

Each event averaged forty attendees for a 45 minute presentation followed by a question and answer period; Q & A sessions ran 45 minutes long and were lively and thoughtful (a few speakers remarked afterwards to the organizers that the volume and level of inquiries were quite high). The events were held in Borough buildings and were promoted via emails, on the Borough's website and Facebook page, and in other forms. Attendees came from the town and from neighboring communities.

After allowing for a summer break, the Civics for the Community series is slated to resume in fall 2018 with a workshop on the topic: *Stabilizing Property Taxes: Are Shared Services a Viable Solution?*

Civics for the Community is spearheaded by Beth Stevens, Ph.D., a Highland Park resident with a background as a sociology professor at NYU and researcher for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and for Mathematica Policy Research. Dr. Stevens was assisted by an active committee of fellow residents and received logistical and promotional support, as well as regular encouragement, from Highland Park Mayor Gayle Brill Mittler.

Civics for the Community has greatly benefited the Borough of Highland Park by responding to a groundswell of interest in learning more about how government at all levels works. The educational workshops have engaged many of our residents in constructive and well-informed discussions about the functions of government, the challenges state and local elected officials face in setting policy, and the best approaches to influence government decisions.

The Borough of Highland Park looks forward to continuing this educational series and believes that it can be replicated across New Jersey – especially in towns near one of our state's fine colleges and universities (as they are a wonderful source of informed experts on the topics).

September 26, 2018