



Civic Assembly + Charter Review: Bringing Residents into the Process

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Richard Young, Executive Director, CivicLex

Kit Anderson, Deputy Director, CivicLex



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What is the Charter?

The Urban County Charter is essentially Lexington's local constitution. It's the rulebook that outlines how our local government is set up, what it's allowed to do, and the rules it has to follow.





Why Charter review?

It's been nearly 30 years since Lexington last took a broad look at the Charter. It's common for other cities to review their Charter regularly.

- **1972** – Public adopts new Charter merging city + county governments
- **1987** – LFUCG Charter Review Commission
- **1998** – Last Charter Review, led by Commerce Lexington
- **2021** – Redistricting raises concerns about the charter





Past Charter review challenges

In a review of past Charter processes we found many issues, including:

- **Council's proximity to charter review**
 - *"The council badly needs distance from the issue. It's impossible for us to be objective."* – Councilmember Pam Miller, 1987, Lexington Herald-Leader
- **Little public engagement**
 - *"We are completely destroying the charter when we don't have more public input."* – Councilmember Debra Hensley, 1987, Lexington Herald-Leader





2023 - present

- In 2023, CivicLex was approached about co-leading a public review process with Commerce Lexington
- Held initial meetings with Commerce Lexington, who was interested in being in an advisory role
- CivicLex decided to lead a review process only if it meaningfully involved the community in decision making and was independent
- Settled on a *Citizen's Assembly* model and secured non-LFUCG funding
- Formed an Advisory Group to guide strategy and process





Advisory Group

- **Catherine Annis** , Assistant Professor, University of Kentucky Martin School
- **Joshua Douglas** , Acting Associate Dean for Research & University Research Professor; Ashland, Inc-Spears Distinguished Research Professor of Law, University of Kentucky; CivicLex Board Member
- **Andi Johnson** , Chief Policy Officer & Director of Regional Engagement, Commerce Lexington
- **Susan Lamb** , Fayette County Clerk
- **David Lowe** , Fayette County Commission, Parks Advisory Board Member
- **Christian Motley** , Vice President, Partnerships and Community Impact, Results for America
- **Abby Piper** , Founder & Managing Partner, Piper Smith
- **Martin Rivers** , Senior Services Commission Member



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What is a Civic Assembly?

Think of a Civic Assembly as “jury duty for public policy”

- **Lottery system** builds a random, representative group of people
- Assembly **learns** about an issue, hears **testimony**, and **deliberates** over multiple weeks
- Assembly makes a **recommendation** to legislative body / policymakers
- Between 1973 - 2023, there have been **700+ Assemblies** worldwide
- Great tool for engaging public on **complex issues** when **trust is low**
- Deschutes County, Oregon Assembly on Youth Homelessness





<https://youtu.be/Aph2upOavV4?si=HtHNEXz-3obLo1nS>



Lexington's first Civic Assembly

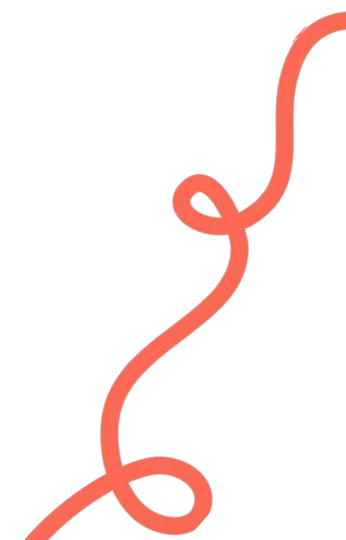
- We will host Lexington's first Civic Assembly in spring 2026 focused on the following question:
 - *What changes should be made to the Charter to improve representation, trust, and participation in local government?*
- 30-person Assembly with 7-8 sessions in February and March 2026





Timeline ahead

- **Public engagement + topic prioritization** – Fall 2025
- **Recruitment & selection** – Winter 2025
- **Assembly convenes** – February and March 2026
- **Recommendations delivered to Council** – Spring 2026
- **Response requested from Council** – May and June 2026





Public engagement & topics

- **August - October:** Public engagement to narrow in on what 2-3 topics could most improve representation, trust, & participation. Could include:
 - **Council:** Council Redistricting Process & Rules, Term Limits, Term Lengths and Elections, Compensation, Number of Council Districts
 - **Other:** Public engagement, future charter review processes, publicly-suggested topics
- Engagement similar to scaled-down On the Table, community events, surveys, etc.





Recruitment & selection

- 6,000+ letters sent to randomly selected Fayette County addresses
 - Expect a 3-8% response rate to a demographic survey
- From responses, we will randomly build multiple 30 person panels that are representative across age, race, district, political party, and more
 - One 30-person panel will be selected, again at random
 - Panel will include two representatives from each Council District, and six at Large





Assembly convening

- Assembly will take place across **7-8 sessions** in February and March
 - Participants will be **compensated** , provided childcare, transportation stipends, and accessibility accommodations
- Members will receive **education** on topics, take **testimony** from experts and people with opposing perspectives, and **deliberate** together
- Assembly will be **publicly viewable**, via livestream or in person
- Assembly will produce an **opinion + recommendations**
 - Consensus or majority/minority





Council's role

- Assembly makes recommendations to Council
- Council has decision-making power over recommendations
- We're asking Council to **commit to publicly and formally responding** to recommendations **as they are presented** (e.g. ballot referral, formal consideration)





Important disclaimers

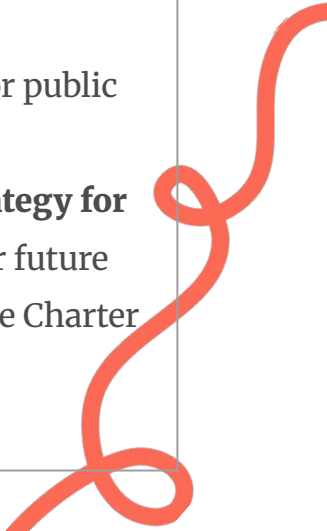
- We **do not yet know what Charter topics** the Assembly will consider
- We will only know what the recommendations are (if any) **after** the Assembly has concluded
- CivicLex **will not advocate** on behalf the recommendations
- CivicLex **will** provide educational information about the process and recommendations after the Assembly
- **Reminder:** this is an experiment in public engagement & decision making!





Why this matters...

... as a process	... for Charter review	... for the future
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Creates space for everyday people to engage deeply with public issues• Builds trust through transparency, learning, and fair representation• Compensates and removes barriers to civic participation• Honors expertise of all kinds	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Brings public scrutiny to potential charter reforms• Allows community members to wrestle with complexity• Builds shared understanding of what representation should mean in Lexington	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sets a precedent for resident-led input on big decisions• Creates new expectations for public involvement• Tests a new strategy for engagement for future topics beyond the Charter





Thank you!

Richard Young, Executive Director | richard@civiclex.org

Kit Anderson, Deputy Director | kit@civiclex.org

Lilly Bramley, Project Specialist | lilly@civiclex.org



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Learn more

[About our project](#)

[Guide on sorition / lottery process](#)

[The New Yorker: What could Citizen Assemblies do for American politics?](#)

[1998 Charter Review Report](#)



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