

# How to Launch an Info District

Towards a public choice for local news and information

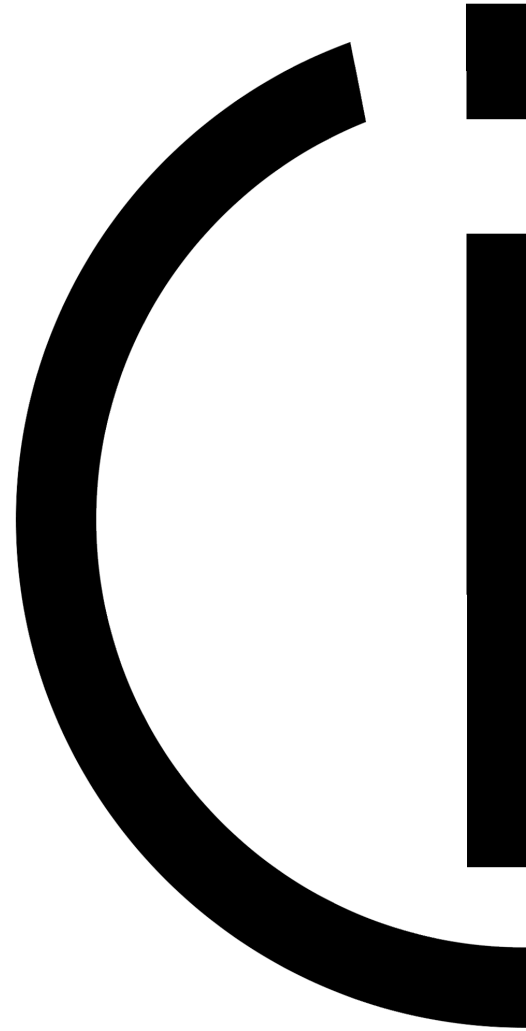
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“When we say organizing, we don’t mean ‘activism.’ Organizing is fundamentally about listening to people tell you what they need and what kind of world they want, and working collaboratively to make it happen. This work requires us to build relationships based on shared values, and out of those relationships cultivate an organized constituency that’s ready, willing and able to demand change and hold the powerful accountable. This is called building power.”<sup>1</sup>

[Don’t Just Engage, Organize!](#)

Free Press News Voices



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# About The Community Info Coop

The Community Information Cooperative is a New Jersey-based nonprofit project dedicated to the democratization of journalism and media.

We equip people with the tools and information they need to design and sustain information ecosystems that strengthen local democracy and increase civic engagement.

Our flagship effort is the info districts project. Info districts are special districts that fund participatory media and civic communications projects to meet local news and information needs. Modeled after other kinds of special districts – like business improvement or library districts – info districts are established democratically, funded by a local tax, and accountable to the community they serve through a public board.

The info district framework was incubated at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism in 2016 with support from the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University.

In 2018, the Reynolds Journalism Institute awarded a fellowship to the Community Info Coop to continue development of the info district framework.

Find out more about us at [infodistricts.org](http://infodistricts.org) or reach us by email at [connect@infodistricts.org](mailto:connect@infodistricts.org).

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# Acknowledgements

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|                      |                          |                          |                           |
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# Introduction

Information is power. But decisions about how information gets discovered, shared, and used are made by those already in power. In most places, the people who are most in need of information have little say in those decisions. This is a proposal to change that.

This guide is intended for people who want to organize their communities to change how decisions are made about what news and information gets produced, how it's distributed, and – most importantly – why.

Social media platforms and the majority of our news media exist for profit. The products and services they provide maximize the extraction of information and wealth from our communities. Mission driven news organizations and public institutions exist for our benefit but most resemble for-profit corporations in their decision making. Foundational issues are decided on by a handful of people usually far removed from the impact of their decisions.

If news and information is what fuels democracy then it should be guided by democracy.

For the Community Info Coop, the process is the product. We believe you cannot have a democratic outcome without a democratic process. This guide outlines what a democratic process could look like if it was targeted at understanding a community's information needs and mobilizing collective action to meet them.

Despite its name, this guide isn't about launching an info district. It's about creating capacity within a community to do so. As a result, following this guide may not create what organizers' intend but may instead lead to some other mechanism for providing needs-based news and information in your community.

# What is an info district

TL;DR

- An info district is a proposed type of special district.
- Info districts support local news and information projects to facilitate civic engagement.
- Like other special districts, they are established by local governments to provide a particular service to geographic area and are funded by a tax.

An info district is a proposed type of special district, defined by geographic boundaries, that funds local news and information projects to facilitate civic engagement. Info districts would be supported by a local tax and accountable to the community they serve through a public board and a participatory practice.

[Special districts](#)<sup>2</sup> are established by ordinance or referendum to provide public utilities like libraries, fire protection, waste management, and nearly two dozen [other types of services](#)<sup>3</sup>. There are nearly 40,000 in the United States and most U.S. states have at least a few hundred special districts.

In New Mexico, special districts manage flooding. In Illinois and New York, they fund libraries. Kansas has 600 cemetery districts. Texas has more than 100 hospital districts.

Each established by municipal, county, tribal, or state governments, special districts have a substantial degree of financial and administrative independence as they are governed by an independent public board and funded by dedicated taxes or fees, unlike governmental departments.

# Why launch an info district

- TL;DR
- As a result of economic and technological shifts, more communities are becoming media deserts.
  - Media desertification poses a systemic risk to the health of local democracies and economies.
  - Despite a few positive trends, market-based approaches cannot solve this crisis.

A growing number of communities in the United States are becoming [media deserts](#)<sup>4</sup>. These are places where there is little to no quality news and information being produced or distributed about a community for that community.

This desertification poses catastrophic problems for the civic health of these places. And more and more communities are affected every day.

Just since 2004, the U.S. [lost](#)<sup>5</sup> 1,800 newspapers and at least another 1,500 have [become](#)<sup>6</sup> “ghosts,” hollowed out due to staffing cuts and unable to adequately cover their communities.

In one [study](#)<sup>7</sup> of 100 U.S. cities over seven days, 20% of local news outlets did not contain a single local news story and only 12% of the 16,000 stories shared that week were about “a local topic, locally produced, and addressing a critical information need.”

And Facebook recently [reported](#)<sup>8</sup> that one in six Americans live in places where – in one 28 day period – there was not a single day where the platform was able to surface five or more recent news articles directly related to those users’ towns or cities.

Non-profit and independent online news organizations have emerged as a counter-trend to desertification. But only [one in five](#)<sup>9</sup> of these new online



organizations find sustainability and a threshold amount of wealth among the audience and advertisers is [correlated](#)<sup>10</sup> with their success. With geographic inequality on the [rise](#)<sup>11</sup>, that leaves fewer and fewer communities with the means to sustain dedicated local news organizations.

But even the fledgling organizations that take flight are managing precarious revenue from [philanthropy](#)<sup>12</sup>, [audience revenue](#)<sup>13</sup>, and [advertising](#)<sup>14</sup>. And they function in information ecosystems that incentivize cheap [digital content](#)<sup>15</sup>.

But research shows that a dedicated local news organization makes government more [responsive](#)<sup>16</sup> and [effective](#)<sup>17</sup> and [less costly](#)<sup>18</sup> and [corrupt](#)<sup>19</sup>. Local news makes communities [more informed about local politics](#)<sup>20</sup>, [increases voter turnout](#)<sup>21</sup>, and [encourages civic participation](#)<sup>22</sup>. It [reduces pollution](#)<sup>23</sup>, [improves public health outcomes](#)<sup>24</sup>, and [makes people nicer to each other](#)<sup>25</sup>.

Traditional market-based approaches will not meet the local news and information needs holding our communities back. And – in the case of communities facing [racism](#)<sup>26</sup>, [sexism](#)<sup>27</sup>, [imperialism](#)<sup>28</sup>, and [poverty](#)<sup>29</sup> – they never really have.

That is why the Community Info Coop developed the info district framework. It is a way for communities to organize digital public squares that meet their local news and information needs and more. Info districts are a fundamental revisioning of local democracy. And the time for democracy to evolve has come.

**Suggested Reading:** [The First Amendment as a Roadmap for Engaged Journalism](#) by Peggy Holman

“The freedoms in the first amendment are more than a list. They are an ecosystem of how people participate with each other and their government in navigating the tension between individual freedom and the common good.”<sup>30</sup>

## The promise of an info district

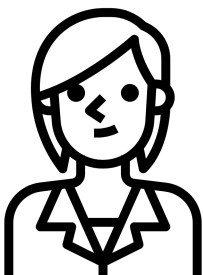
Info districts are collective action mechanisms. Through them, communities can lay a foundation for their 21st century public square. They enable people to have a say in how their information commons is designed instead of relying on the goodwill of platforms, media companies, and advertisers.

It opens up so many opportunities to reimagine how people communicate with each other and the institutions that serve them. Here are just some of the services an info district might provide:



**Paul's packages kept going missing from the lobby of his apartment building.** The landlord wasn't responsive and the police couldn't do much to stop it. Searching online didn't turn up any solutions. So he asked his Community Information Organization (CIO).

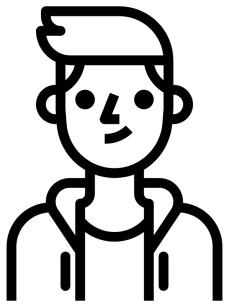
The CIO helped Paul launch a Facebook group for his building. By connecting online and sharing information, they came up with their own solutions to reduce package thefts. They agreed to bring packages inside for each other and coordinated communication with the landlord to get a security camera installed in the lobby. Paul met his own information need and created capacity in his community to solve future problems.



**Rosa is a parent who lives far from the two different schools her children attend.** She works from home and makes her own schedule, so she's usually the one transporting kids to school and activities. At every drop off and pick up, she'd sit in a long line of cars, wondering how many other parents could use help getting their kids to where they had to be.

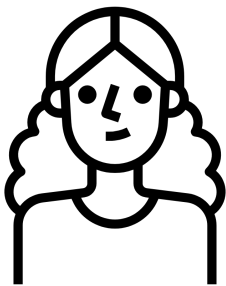
Rosa's Community Information Organization had worked with her

childrens' schools to launch a monthly newsletter for caregivers of students so she reached out. They helped her set up and promote a Google Form where caregivers could share their contact and general location information to build a carpool directory. As a result, Rosa saved herself one trip every week. This year, the carpool directory will be used for a 200+ student marching band.



**Kai owns a small business and would prefer to spend and hire locally.** They know how important it is to invest in their community but they find it hard to reach locals with that message consistently. On the other end, locals looking for work or to start businesses don't know they can rely on Kai.

Thanks to Kai's input, the Community Information Organization identified this miscommunication last year. Since then, their CIO's quarterly business directory highlights businesses looking to buy and hire local. It also launched a local jobs board. This year, they're partnering with a credit union and community college to coordinate a small business accelerator.



**Brandie's water has been bright blue for an entire year.** It's supplied by a regional water authority but all they told her is that they're looking into it. Her municipal government's hands are tied by tight budgets and red tape. She reached out to her Community Information Organization to see what she should do about it.

Brandie lives in a county where there are a few info districts. And it turns out there were residents in each of those districts that were experiencing the same thing. The CIOs in the county pooled resources and hired a journalist to work with residents to investigate this. Next month, the state is bringing charges against a chemical company for polluting her region's groundwater.



**Andre’s city holds a lot of public meetings that go undocumented.**

He wants to be informed about the issues being discussed and decisions being made, but he couldn’t attend them all even if he tried. The local newspaper used to send reporters to a few but they recently made staffing cuts. He brought this up with his Community Information Organization.

The CIO realized there were enough people like Andre that every public meeting could be documented if they worked together. The CIO created a program that trains residents of any age to document public meetings and share what they hear with the community. This year, they’ll begin paying “documenters” like Andre \$50 for every meeting they attend.

**Required Reading:** [Don’t Just Engage, Equip](#) from City Bureau

“Equipping is not the same as empowerment because, much like the phrase “giving voice to the voiceless” assumes that people are voiceless, empowerment often assumes that people are powerless.

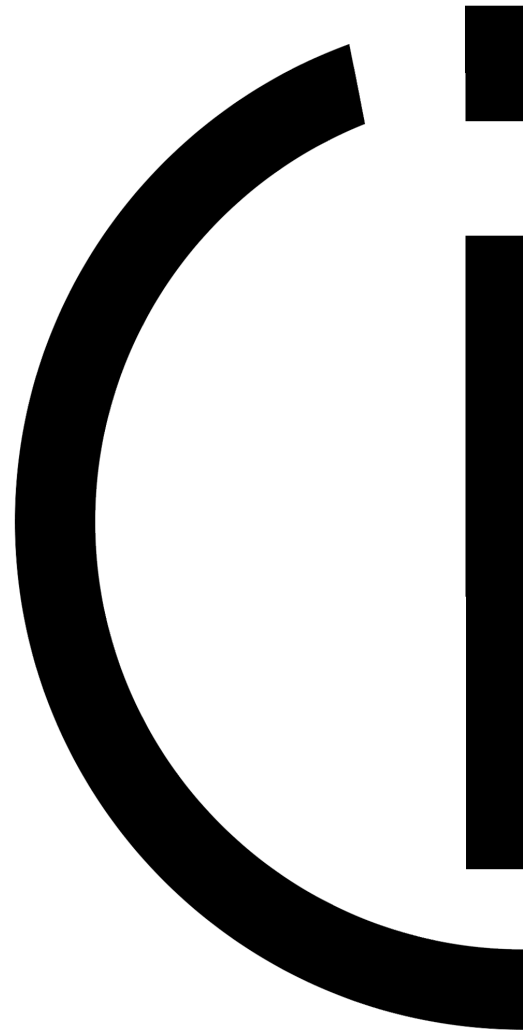
Equipping is recognizing that there is no cap on the amount of power people can create, recognizing the power people already have and providing access to resources that build power.

The difference here is key. With approaches that equip, your community causes the potholes to get fixed, the financial audit of local government and the mayor to be fired for corruption.”<sup>31</sup>

“If you trust the people, they become trustworthy.”<sup>32</sup>

Emergent Strategy

adrienne maree brown



# How to launch an info district

Launching an info district may take anywhere from 12 to 24 months, depending on the organizer's background and existing network. Here is an overview of the process:

1. Scope your campaign
2. Commit to an equitable process
3. Begin mapping your information ecosystem
4. Form a community advisory board
5. Design your campaign
6. Launch your campaign

Organizers should be familiar with this guide and have documented their initial findings from steps 1 through 3 before inviting community members to join your advisory board. You should come to the table with knowledge to share. So, the first few steps you'll take on your own or with a handful of fellow organizers.

Your community advisory board will help design and guide your campaign once it's scoped and you have your information ecosystem is mapped. The campaign is an effort to engage the broader community in documenting their information needs and build momentum to launch info district. The result will inform your goals and approach to establishing an info district.

Through this process, organizers may find local institutions willing to adopt new practices without necessitating the establishment of an info district. In some cases, organizers may need to formally petition their local governments. These and other opportunities will emerge at the end of your community information survey.

Details and resources for how to launch an info district are documented below.

**Suggested Reading:** [Journalism for Democracy and Communities: A New Framework](#) from Journalism That Matters

“We see our task as not reimagining and reinventing journalism but rather imagining and inventing inclusive, generative communications ecosystems that foster thriving, resilient communities – what we call ‘civic communications.’

With community at its heart, it makes room for all voices to be heard, all peoples to be seen, and residents to be informed and in action on issues of importance to themselves and their communities.”<sup>33</sup>

## Scope your campaign

Scoping your campaign is about understanding the breadth and depth of your info district efforts.

Here are the variables you’ll need to consider to get a sense of that scope:

- **Financial** – How much money does an info district need to thrive and how can our community afford it?
- **Social** – What are the socioeconomic inequalities in our community and how do we design equity into the process to address them?
- **Political** – Does our community have favorable elected representatives or an initiative and referendum process?
- **Legal** – What are the legal frameworks under which we can establish an info district?

Read more about these considerations below.

### Financial scope

Info districts establish a publicly accountable fund for needs-based local news and information. But that fund’s capacity to meet those needs is dependent on the amount of money it can raise from the public. Organizers should have a rough

calculation of how much that might be. Two factors significantly influence the amount: population size and discretionary income.

The more people a community has, the less each person has to pay for a certain level of service. The fewer people a community has, the more each person would have to pay to meet the same level of service.

Find out your community's median income in order to calculate what a reasonable annual fee might look like. Use the Economic Policy Institute's [Family Budget calculator](#)<sup>34</sup> to estimate your area's cost of living and find out whether people making the median can afford to pay info district fees.

Extending the boundaries of an info district can reduce the per-person fee by increasing the population of the district.

While useful as a general measure of viability, the above does not take into consideration that local taxes are not actually assessed per person. So, have an idea of how the tax will be collected. In practice, taxpayers may pay varying amounts dependent on the value of the properties they own or the goods and services they buy in the community.

This is also an opportunity to think more broadly about how an info district might be financed.

Organizers should also consider industry-specific taxation. It may be possible to supplement property or sales tax with taxes on relevant industries operating in your community like internet service providers or cable TV companies.

Consider how existing public spending might be reallocated towards an info district. Local governments already spend money on community information, but they often do so poorly. Can an info district take over the public access TV and spend that money more effectively? What about the mayor's communications budget?



These sorts of questions may reveal unique opportunities to supercharge your community's information ecosystem without needing to raise additional revenue.

Here are some examples of how local governments are already funding special projects.

- The Denver Scientific and Cultural Facilities District is [funded](#)<sup>35</sup> through a 0.1% sales tax.
- Cities across the U.S. [charge](#)<sup>36</sup> franchise fees to fund public access TV.
- In New York, "Special Legislative District Public Libraries" are paid for [through](#)<sup>37</sup> property taxes.

It is important to also note that property and sales taxes have historically been [regressive](#)<sup>38</sup>, relying on those with less wealth to pay a higher share of their income in taxes. Therefore communities should consider measures to make an info district tax assessment more just through targeted tax abatements, graduated tax brackets, or by taxing luxury goods or services.

You can document your financial considerations by answering these questions.

- What's your community's median income?
- What's the cost of living in your community for a single adult? Two adults? A family of four?
- What are some of the ways your local government is spending money on communications?
- Who are the cable TV or internet service providers in your community?
- How much would an info district have to charge per resident in your community to raise \$10,000? How about \$100,000?
- What could an info district accomplish with \$10,000? Or \$100,000?

## **Social scope**

An info district asks a community to public fund news and information services that may be provided by existing or new local news organizations. It is important for organizers to address the disservice local news has done to these communities in order to outline a vision for the service you seek to provide through an info district.

While local news can produce so much good, it also has played a role in exacerbating the injustices faced by many historically marginalized people through irresponsible coverage.

That includes the working class, people of color, indigenous communities, queer and trans communities and people who are disabled, experiencing homelessness, or who are currently or formerly incarcerated.

These are uncomfortable conversations, especially for those who have never had them before. Organizers should look for evidence that communities are engaged in ongoing dialogue around these issues. You should also actively seek feedback from local stakeholders involved in those conversations to build relationships and involve them in your process.

Organizers should also look for areas of high civic engagement or a history of collective action. Civic engagement can be measured by voter turnout or local social media activity. Collective action might be observed in other publicly funded or cooperative efforts to meet local needs like volunteer fire departments or municipal broadband networks.

Being considerate of who is civically engaged and why will help organizers understand the opportunities and challenges you face. Media can be a powerful tool for social justice. And that is the mission of an info district.

**Required Reading:** [Principles to Guide Our Work](#) from Detroit Digital Justice Coalition

“Digital justice ensures that all members of our community have equal access to media and technology, as producers as well as consumers...fuels the creation of knowledge, tools and technologies that are free and shared openly with the public...provides spaces through which people can investigate community problems, generate solutions, create media and organize together...advances community-based economic development by expanding technology access for small businesses, independent artists and other entrepreneurs... [and] integrates media and technology into education in order to transform teaching and learning, to value multiple learning styles and to expand the process of learning beyond the classroom and across the lifespan.”<sup>39</sup>

## Political scope

Political viability is dependent on the will of those holding elected office and whether citizens have the right to initiate a referendum through an initiative process.

First, organizers may lobby their local government to establish an info district. Their elected representative may favor the establishment of an info district and place the question on an upcoming ballot. This approach requires the good will of local elected officials.

But the availability of an alternative approach makes establishing an info district more likely. In many [communities in the U.S.](#)<sup>40</sup>, citizens have the right to bypass their local government through an initiative. This process effectively forces a referendum by petition and gives organizers the power to channel public frustration with local news and information needs into direct action.

## Legal scope

Legal viability requires identifying clear legal grounding for your efforts. Geographic area can be expanded to support financial viability. A public campaign can be conducted to lay the social foundation for an info district. Local elected officials

can be pressured or replaced. But while changing state law to allow the establishment of an info district will be challenging, it's not impossible.

Either way, info district organizers should focus on designing legal frameworks that maximize for public participation and accountability. The goal is to identify what's possible and what is not.

Additional lines of legal research should be pursued if you discover a legal framework that can be adapted to fulfill the mission of an info district. This may include a library district or the expansion of an existing special district. Review your state's legal statutes and speak with local policy experts to understand what kind of public funding mechanisms your community can leverage.

Completing the [Info District Legal Scoping Worksheet](#) in the appendix will help organizers document the potential scope of their legal efforts.

**Suggested Reading:** [Private Governments or Public Policy Tools? The Law and Public Policy of New Jersey's Special Improvement Districts](#) from [Business Improvement Districts – Research, Theories, and Controversies](#)

“From a collective action perspective, New Jersey's special improvement districts are institutional arrangements that facilitate the necessarily joint provision and production of the local public good of place...”<sup>41</sup>

## Commit to an equitable process

Local media deserts are [missing markets](#)<sup>42</sup>, places where a lack of information, trust, and financial and social coordination keep a market from emerging and sustaining itself. Special districts provide a solution to the coordination problem but don't inherently solve for the lack of trust and information.

The role of the campaign and its organizers is to exemplify the levels of trust and transparency a community should expect from an info district. Organizers can do this by committing to a process that is equitable and participatory from the start.

This also increases the future likelihood that the info district will remain responsive to the evolving needs of the community it serves.

Committing to an equitable process is key to establishing a thriving and sustainable info district. No member of your community should be left behind.

**Required Reading:** [The Context Experts](#) from Tamarack Institute

“Authentic community engagement is the intentional process of co-creating solutions in partnership with people who know best, through their own experiences, the barriers to opportunity. Authentic community engagement is grounded in building relationships based on mutual respect that acknowledges each person’s added value to developing solutions together.”<sup>43</sup>

**Suggested Reading:** [Reframing the Monitorial Citizen: A New Contract for News Media](#) from Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement

“The new contract between journalists and the public will frame journalism as an act of citizenship rather than an entity for and separate from citizens. It’ll resist the urge to claim the role of ‘watchdog’ as the sole domain of journalists—instead it’ll share that responsibility and work to shift the balance, engaging people in the production of news and information. It’ll train citizens to hold governments and powerful individuals to account by democratizing journalistic skills and broadening paths to the media industry. It’ll meet people where they are, not where they are most profitable. It’ll move beyond disruption and into repair, and in the process it’ll renew its mission as a public good. Our democracy will be better for it.”<sup>44</sup>

## Begin mapping your information ecosystem

Organizers may have a lot of knowledge of their local information ecosystem but it is important to go through a more formal process to map your local news ecosystem and study it.

The Listening Post Collective provides a playbook for engaging a community. They [recommend](#)<sup>45</sup> you start by listening:

Go for a walk in the community, but leave your microphone behind. Pay attention to where people hang out and how information is shared in popular locations like churches, grocery stores, libraries, community centers, and government offices. Sit down at a restaurant, strike up a conversation, look for local signs posted in the neighborhood. Search for community bulletin boards. The point of all of this is to catch people in their daily comfort zones. Eventually you'll find ways to share important information through these spaces and networks.

Here are the tactics they suggest:

- **Observe information flow.** Where and how is information being shared? Do you see the local newspaper? Do you hear people listening to the radio? Are people on their cell phones? What community messaging do you see—signs, billboards, public art, official government notices? What are they referring to?
- **Meet with community leaders** and ask about what they are hearing from residents about their needs and priorities. Ask leaders how they get the word out in their area.
- **Go to events.** Neighborhood watch meetings, religious services, community markets, festivals, etc. What's the focus of the event? What's the turnout? How did people hear about the event?

- **Go online.** Where is a community sharing information with each other online—Facebook groups? Non-profit websites? Community connector websites like Next Door? Email newsletters?
- **Notes,** take lots of them, and get contact details from people!
- **Photos,** take lots of them, especially images of the various ways information is getting shared e.g., photos in people’s windows, flyers at a local grocery store, community signs on telephone poles, newspapers on stoops, or messages on local church signs.

Beginning a formal listening process is important because it will fill gaps in understanding and let organizers begin documenting their process. This documentation becomes a form of social currency that can show your dedication to transparency and collaboration.

Follow the [Information Ecosystem Outline Worksheet](#) in the appendix to help you document what you find. You do not have to completely map your ecosystem before moving on as you’ll learn more during your campaign. But having this initial sense will be crucial to building relationships with stakeholders and recruiting a representative advisory board.

**Required Reading:** [Mapping Your Community’s Information Ecosystem](#) from The Local News Lab

“...Our vision of the future of local news as a deeply connected and collaborative ecosystem...[that] takes into account how diverse systems (economics, audience attention, technology, and more) interact and affect how we build more sustainable and responsive local news.”<sup>46</sup>

**Suggested Reading:** [Jersey Shore: Information Needs Assessment](#) from Internews

“Ask your audience what they would like to know and understand better, and how best to reach them with that information. However, keep in mind that people don't always know exactly what they want or need, or are unable to accurately articulate this (i.e. if you ask hypothetical questions, you will get hypothetical answers). Observation of behavior is really useful, so get out and spend time with a variety of communities.”<sup>47</sup>

## Form a community advisory board

Review your information ecosystem outline and identify key stakeholder groups, especially information producers and distributors and historically underserved communities. Reach out to community leaders to ask for recommendations from those groups for your advisory board.

The goals of the board are to:

- Engage a wide range of the community's experiences and perspectives
- Ensure the campaign's relevance to the community
- Develop indigenous leadership
- Create public awareness of the project
- Allow diverse input, evaluation, and accountability

Consider using the Democracy Fund's [Focus Groups Guide](#)<sup>48</sup> to recruit for representation and inclusivity.

Organizers should hold an event or conference call to introduce community advisors to one another and brief them on efforts to date and ask for feedback input on upcoming plans.

Here are some questions you can ask your community advisors:

1. Who and what are we missing from our work to date?
2. What skills or information do you need to contribute?
3. What skills or information does your community need to contribute?
4. What are some opportunities for collaboration in the room?

Take notes during the meeting and spend time adapting your community advisors' feedback into your project plan. Report those changes and keep your advisors up-to-date on your plans so they can continue to give feedback.



Organizers can also rely on their advisory board for more support as things progress. The board could form working groups around key issues. Those groups may include:

- Legal
  - Conducting legal research
  - Developing legal framework
  - Drafting legislation and/or petition
- Engagement
  - Doing outreach to stakeholders
  - Training and educating allies
  - Facilitating events and or canvassing
- Finance and administration
  - Documenting the process
  - Fundraising
  - Scheduling and planning

Advisory board members that take on these responsibilities are not necessarily in charge of doing the associated tasks but instead are accountable for making sure those tasks get done. That can include coordinating with local experts, other volunteers, or the Community Info Coop.

You can use the [RACI responsibility assignment framework](#)<sup>49</sup> to assign and track duties.

## **Plan your campaign**

Organizers should work with their community advisory board to determine goals, tactics, and success metrics for campaign.

A campaign has three parts:

- **Listening** – What are the news, information, and communication needs in your community? In particular, of underserved people?
- **Reporting** – Share what you’ve learned back to your community – needs, assets, solutions.
- **Activating** – Collaborate with people in your community to advocate for implementing the solutions you’ve identified together.

In general, the goal of the campaign is to understand the information and communication needs of your community and launch a process that leads to the development of solutions. An info district may be one way to fund those solutions. If there are others, your goal as an organizer is to help identify them.

**Required Reading:** [Guide to Journalism and Design](#) from Tow Center for Digital Journalism

“...Human-centered design starts with the premise that you as the designer don’t have all the answers...and that the best thing you can do is to bring other people into the process in an effort to design for their psychologies and contexts.”<sup>50</sup>

**Additional Reading:** [Design Thinking for Libraries](#) from IDEO

“When people think of design they often think of aesthetics such as form, or tangible objects like the design of a beautiful chair. But design thinking as a process can have a much broader impact and you can use it to solve for all kinds of library challenges including programs, spaces, services, and systems.”<sup>51</sup>

[Design Thinking for Educators](#) from IDEO

“Design thinking is about believing we can make a difference, and having an intentional process in order to get to new, relevant solutions that create positive impact.”<sup>52</sup>

[Design Thinking for Public Services](#) from IDEO

“Design thinking is a human-centred approach, meaning that it starts with people’s needs (and considers both citizens and civil servants)...at a time when both citizens and civil servants feel they are being led by processes and regulation, rather than enabled by them.”<sup>53</sup>

## Plan to listen

The first part of the campaign will continue the information ecosystem assessment you began when you started mapping. Your aim will be to identify information producers, assets, channels, and needs as well as understand how communication and information powers your community.

The Listening Post Collective's [Engagement Activities Guide](#)<sup>54</sup> provides a good overview of the tactics you can use to conduct an information ecosystem assessment:

Over the course of the last four years, we've tried many methods for engaging communities with news and information. While there is a growing list of new, innovative digital ways to connect with people, we believe those approaches are more sustainable when paired with in-person engagement strategies. Here's a list of both our offline and online recommendations for engagement.

[The Participatory Budgeting Outreach Toolkit](#)<sup>55</sup> from the Participatory Budgeting Project can help you center the underserved:

Many people - especially those whose communities have been historically underrepresented in government - face a host of barriers to participating in public meetings, including child care needs, work schedules, limited transportation, lack of translation and interpretation services, concerns about potential interaction with law enforcement, and more...But even beyond these barriers, one of the biggest reasons people don't show up is that they don't think their participation will make a difference...In order to overcome these barriers, people have to be personally invited, convinced of the importance of their presence,

and made aware of the specific impact their participation will have on the outcome.

Here are some questions to help you plan this part of the campaign:

- What questions will you ask interviewees? Survey respondents?
- Where will you reach people? How?
- How many people do you want to interview? To survey?
- How will you assure you hear from underserved communities?
- What organizations will you collaborate with? What are ongoing events that you could convene people around?

Here are some key performance indicators you could measure:

- Event attendees
- Total survey respondents
- Total interviews conducted
- Subscribers (email or text)
- Information assets identified
- Information producers identified
- Information channels identified
- Information impacts identified
- Information needs identified
- Preferred information need channels identified
- Desired impacts of information needs identified

**Required Reading:** [Information Needs Assessment Survey](#) from Listening Post Playbook

“This survey template contains recommended questions for you to ask your community so that you can better understand their information needs and where they access information. Play around with it. Adapt and edit the survey to address your local needs and constraints.”<sup>56</sup>

**Suggested Reading:** [Listening is a Revolutionary Act: Applying the methods of international media development to the local news crisis in the United States](#) from Internews

“I created a basic information needs assessment...I made a list of neighborhoods that I wanted to connect with, and community spaces within those neighborhoods, and headed out with a card-table, some clipboards and stack of paper surveys. [We] went to midnight basketball games, sat on porches, visited libraries, community markets, churches, neighborhood meetings, and even doughnut shops to listen and gather data.”<sup>57</sup>

[Listening is not enough: Mistrust and local news in urban and suburban Philly](#) from Tow Center for Digital Journalism

“This is not a question of simply listening to audiences as consumers and responding to their desires in a populist sense. Rather, by engaging communities directly in dialogue and offering them ways to participate, media can act as a facilitator and mobilizer in shifting narratives toward the problem-solving people told us they want from their news.”<sup>58</sup>

## Plan to report

In the second part of your campaign, you will report back your findings. You’ll use the stories you’ve heard to connect people to the data you collect.

Here’s an example of a human context framing the findings of the [North Omaha Information Ecosystem Assessment](#)<sup>59</sup> from Internews:

Overall, folks want a meaningful exploration of larger issues challenging the community and relevant information they can actually use. We met one resident at a McDonald’s in north Omaha and they said, “If the menu changed and coffee went up a buck, the old people in here would have a fit. That’s relevant, that’s a story that impacts people here. That’s what has to happen. Stories that impact people on a day-to-day basis.”

Here is one from [Más Información](#)<sup>60</sup>, an information needs assessment of Latino Immigrants in Oakland, California from Internews:

“I want news that helps me take action rather than leaving me feeling defeated and helpless,” said a speaker at a Cinco de Mayo State of Latinos panel discussion when asked about the role of news in empowering the Latino community. As his response implies, the answer to negative news is not necessarily positive news, but empowering news—resources or information that the news consumer can use to make decisions or take action.

Organizers should produce something like these Internews reports to document their community’s story and needs. Include findings about opportunities to meet these needs through new or refocused public spending. This is a key component of building momentum for organizing your community in support of an info district.

You’ll share what you produce widely so make plans for making the report available online and in print. You can host a culminating event to present your findings and discuss next steps.

Here are some questions to help you plan this part of the campaign:

- Who will produce this report?
- How will you make it accessible and useful?
- How will you make our methodology and data transparent?
- How will you center underserved groups in our report?
- What are public funding options you could highlight?

## **Plan to activate**

The third part of your campaign is difficult to plan because it is dependent on the results of your research and ecosystem survey. But whatever it is, the style of your organizing will change as it will now become aimed at implementation rather than needs-finding.

Based on your community’s input, you’ll work to activate stakeholders, interviewees, survey respondents, event attendees, subscribers, and other constituent groups to encourage your local government to adopt your findings.

Each community’s framework will be dependent on local laws and engagement outcomes. Info districts might be grant-making or directly provide services. They may have dedicated board seats or public elections. This should be addressed in your draft legislation and petition.

If you live in an area where your community has initiative or referendum power, the [Citizens’ Guide to Initiative & Referendum](#)<sup>61</sup> from The Citizens’ Campaign can give you an example of how to approach this process:

“Initiative was devised during the progressive era of the early twentieth century when the traditional notion of representative democracy was deemed insufficient because the institutions of government were thought to have been hijacked by big money and large economic interests. They remain an excellent way for citizens to constructively participate and see their proposals enacted into law.

On the local level, initiative campaigns do not require large amounts of money; they just require interested citizens who are willing to dedicate some of their time to making their community better. After all, local governments make critical decisions that help determine quality of life including whether property taxes are affordable, whether children are safe from crime and whether open space is preserved.”

Here are some questions that can lead your planning:

- Who will be in charge of government outreach and education?
- Who will draft the ordinance and/or petition? How will the community’s input be reflected in it?

- What fundraising mechanism will you suggest? How is it progressive?
- Who will coordinate the petition drive?

## **Launch your campaign**

Organizers should have sound legal frameworks and a purposeful, participatory process designed before launching the campaign. But both of those subjects may evolve once you begin having broader public conversations about your community's news and information needs. Iterate on your process along the way. Document as much as you can to build trust with your community and for the benefit of future info district organizers. Trust your process. Let your community lead you.



## Conclusion

This report is based on years of research but it's also aspirational. Info districts are a new concept that's never been tested. But that doesn't make it any less possible.

The Community Info Coop is about a quarter of the way through the process outlined above. But we wanted to document our existing knowledge so that others can begin building on our work.

We believe that news and information is a public good. We believe information ecosystems can empower people instead of scare and profit from them.

Redesigning those systems to improve the way we communicate with each other and hold our institutions accountable is an international project. Platforms, governments, foundations, media organizations, and technology companies require democratization if we are to sustain and expand democracy in the 21st century.

It is an imperfect project. And one without end. But it cannot be done without a local effort leading and sustaining the change. Info districts are one part of that effort.

We'll return to this guide as we continue our work. We'll add new resources, share new findings, and make it more practical. If you want to stay up to date on our work, sign up for updates from the Community Info Coop [here](#).

If you'd like to help sustain our work financially or through participation, email us at [connect@infodistricts.org](mailto:connect@infodistricts.org).

# Appendix

## Info District Legal Scoping Worksheet

Follow this guide and questionnaire to understand your legal scope.

1. Search your state legislature’s website and search for “special districts” to find relevant statutes. Your state may have a single law governing special districts as well as other laws elaborating on special district rules.
2. Search your state legislature’s website for “referendum”, “initiative”, or “petition” to find statutes relevant to your state’s initiative and referendum process.
3. Answer the following questions.
  - a. What sort of special districts can you create in your state?
  - b. Does the purpose of any of those special districts fit the mission of an info district?
    - i. What is the process for establishing special districts?
      1. Which types of local governments can create them?
        - a. Municipal
        - b. County
        - c. Tribal
        - d. State
      2. What are the procedural requirements for establishing a special district without a referendum?
        - a. Is it possible?
        - b. How many times must a governing body hold a vote before final passage?
        - c. What are the requirements for public notice?
        - d. How can local residents or property owners formally oppose the establishment of a special district?

- e. What are the potential outcomes?
  - f. What is the timeline?
- 3. What are the procedural requirements for establishing a special district via a government-initiated referendum?
  - a. Is it possible?
  - b. What is the deadline for making the next ballot?
  - c. How many times must a governing body hold a vote before final passage?
  - d. What are the requirements for public notice?
  - e. How can local residents or property owners formally oppose the establishment of a special district?
  - f. What are the potential outcomes?
  - g. What is the timeline?
- 4. What are the procedural requirements for establishing a special district via a citizen initiative and referendum?
  - a. Is it possible?
  - b. What is the deadline for making the next ballot?
  - c. How many signatures will you need to collect?
  - d. What are the requirements for public notice?
  - e. How can local residents or property owners formally oppose the establishment of a special district?
  - f. What are the potential outcomes?
  - g. What is the timeline?
- c. How must special districts be governed and managed?
  - i. Can the board of trustees be directly elected?
    - 1. Who is eligible to run for the board?
    - 2. Who is eligible to vote?
    - 3. What is the length of a board member's term? Are there term limits?
  - ii. If the board of trustees cannot be directly elected, how are they selected?

1. Does the local government appoint trustees? How many?
2. Who is eligible to be appointed?
3. What is the length of a board member's term? Are there term limits?
4. Can board seats be designated for representatives of different sectors of a community's information ecosystem?
  - iii. Who has authority to set special district budgets?
- d. Identify existing local improvement districts in your community.
  - i. Can districts overlap in your area?
  - ii. Can the purpose, funding, or geographic reach of one of these existing districts be expanded to meet the info district mission?
4. Find research or articles about special districts in your area.
  - a. Search online for your city, county, state, or tribe's name and "special district."
  - b. Search academic journals for your city, county, state, or tribe's name and "special district."
5. Get in touch with experts to get feedback on your proposed info district.
  - a. Reach out your state's Secretary of State or Department of Community Affairs.
  - b. Reach out to public policy experts at local colleges and universities.
  - c. Reach out to legal experts to confirm legal viability.

# Information Ecosystem Outline Worksheet

Use this outline to help you begin documenting your ecosystem map:

1. Who are the information producers in your community? What are their characteristics? What do they produce information about?
  - a. Media
  - b. Governments and schools
  - c. Private industry
  - d. Interest groups
  - e. Political parties
  - f. Non-governmental organizations
  - g. Religious institutions and healthcare providers
  - h. Finance and real estate
  - i. Ad hoc associations
  - j. Individuals
2. How does information travel in your community?
  - a. Digital distribution and comments sections
    - i. Platforms
    - ii. Publishers
    - iii. Influencers
  - b. Digital groups
    - i. Facebook groups
    - ii. Subreddits
    - iii. Forums
    - iv. Email listservs
    - v. Next Door communities
    - vi. Group messaging
  - c. Radio or TV
    - i. Providers
    - ii. Channels and content
    - iii. Geographic reach

- d. Physical
    - i. Home
    - ii. Work
    - iii. Third places
      - 1. Cafes, bars, and restaurants
      - 2. Salons and barbershops
      - 3. Markets and stores
      - 4. Religious institutions and community centers
      - 5. Parks and cultural institutions
  - e. Physical methods
    - i. Bulletin boards
    - ii. Direct mail
    - iii. Public art
    - iv. Consumer information
    - v. Billboards and advertising
    - vi. Word of mouth
3. What variables change what information is produced and distributed? How?
- a. Time of the day
  - b. Day of the week
  - c. Week of the month
  - d. Month of the year
  - e. Natural disasters
  - f. Public health emergencies
  - g. Elections
  - h. Holidays and celebrations
4. What communities are historically underserved by this information ecosystem? How?

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