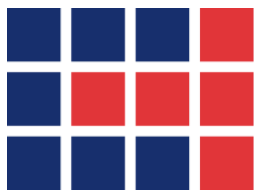


# CommonPlace

## OVERVIEW + STRATEGIC PLAN

The Laboratory for Civic Technology is on a mission to harness the internet to revitalize local community in America. We are deploying our decade of experience in civic tech design to revive CommonPlace, a modern town bulletin that has proven to be the best not-for-profit, open source web platform for local community engagement.



CIVIC TECH LAB

November 2016

## OurCommonPlace.org

A civic-minded, not-for-profit, and open source web platform for local community engagement

## Project Overview

Laboratory for  
Civic Technology

### American community is in decline.

**Local community matters.** Interactions between neighbors, participation in civic life, collective trust, and norms of reciprocity are key to the prosperity of American towns. Unfortunately, as Robert Putnam explained in his seminal book *Bowling Alone*, over the past fifty years, there has been a **steep decline in local community engagement** in America. Unless we develop **new civic institutions** to re-connect us to our neighbors and our towns, we will lose that civic spirit that makes our democracy work.

### The local civic tech industry has produced bad tech and bad civics.

The **civic technology industry** aims to develop such new civic institutions. Unfortunately, most of civic tech built to date suffers from **bad tech**. Well-intentioned projects, plagued by poorly designed user interfaces and a lack of credible theories of user acquisition and retention, has led to a sprawling graveyard of once-promising civic apps.

Equally unfortunate is that most of the good tech online today has had **bad civics**. Facebook nailed user experience, but fails to connect us to our neighbors. Craigslist is a successful place-based clearinghouse, but it fails to build local trust and neighbor-to-neighbor connections. NextDoor knows how to build a platform, but its for-profit, growth-minded nature is raising red flags among community groups.

Indeed, **civic tech doesn't work like magic**: like every other civic institution, it requires engaging design, a theory of member retention, and on-the-ground, real-world community organizing.

### An integrated and civic-minded local information infrastructure does not yet exist.

Local civic life used to be held together by local information infrastructures: town newspapers, post office bulletin boards, and well-attended community meetings. Today, these single access points for community engagement are in decline. Unfortunately, the civic tech industry has yet to build an adequate replacement, opting for a flurry of single-purpose apps (one for events, one for babysitters, one for news, etc.) that fail to reach a critical mass. American towns still await the 21st century town bulletin.

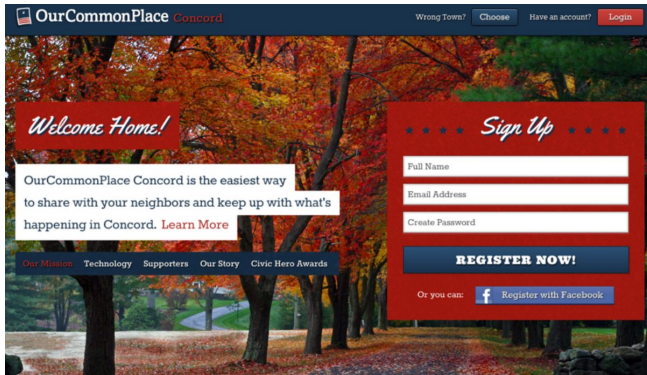
### We've built one before and we can build one again.

In 2011, while students of Putnam at Harvard, **we built CommonPlace, a web platform for local community engagement** that fulfilled our vision for a modern local community information infrastructure. From 2011-2013, we sent community organizers to a dozen towns to pilot it. **It worked**: CommonPlace helped thousands of people get more from the places they live in. Neighbors used CommonPlace to ask for help, find bike riding buddies, report lost animals, form playgroups and much more. Leaders used CommonPlace to find volunteers, promote events, publicize emergency updates and answer questions about town initiatives. In Warwick, NY and Falls Church, VA we had more residents using CommonPlace than Twitter. **In 2015, we formed a non-profit, the Laboratory for Civic Technology, to revive this model and take it national.**

**We aim to:** (1) revive CommonPlace as an open source web platform for local community engagement; and (2) re-launch in five towns.

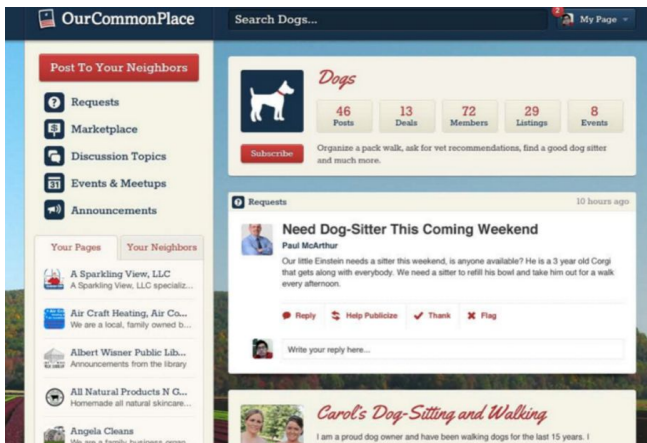
# The CommonPlace Platform

CommonPlace is an online town bulletin that makes it super easy for neighbors and civic leaders to share and connect with their town:



**1. Each town gets its own 'CommonPlace':** it can be hosted on the town's own servers/URL or on our central server/URL.

**2. Neighbors go to their town's CommonPlace and register:** they verify they live in town, fill out a basic profile and agree to community norms.



**3. Neighbors immediately start receiving a daily email bulletin:** bulletins contain posts, events, and announcements from neighbors and civic leaders.

**4. Whenever neighbors want to post to the bulletin or reply to bulletin posts, they visit the site:** there they can post a question, idea or announcement they want to share, as well as message neighbors and civic groups



**5. Civic leaders can start profile pages:** from there, they can post their own announcements and events, which also go in the bulletin.

# Proof of Concept (2011-2013)

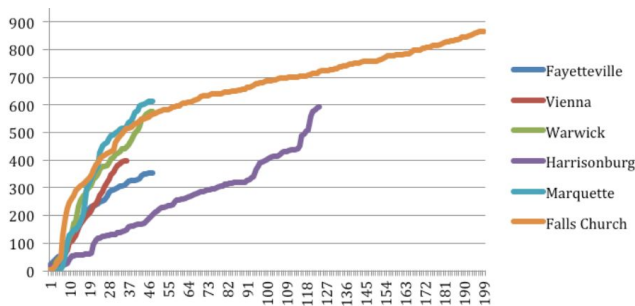
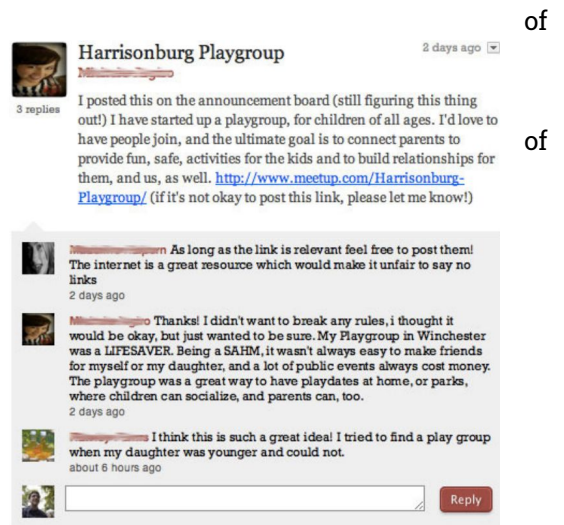
In January 2011, as students at Harvard College, we built the first CommonPlace platform and launched in Falls Church, Virginia. Within 12 weeks, 20% of the households in Falls Church had signed up to the network and hundreds of needs, events, announcements and private messages were sent and responded to across the network.

Given the success in Falls Church, we hired a full-time designer and developer to update the platform. The following summer, we hired and trained seven community organizers and launched five more communities around the country: Marquette, MI; Fayetteville, AR; Warwick, NY; Vienna, VA; and Harrisonburg, VA. By the end of 2011, there were 5,300 neighbors signed up across six CommonPlaces, and over 100 local organizations signed up with pages.



By the end of our first wave organizing, we averaged 4-10 posts per day in each network and had over 70% of our network engage with CommonPlace on a given day. Over 80% of all neighborhood needs received either public or private responses from neighbors. Even after the community organizers left,

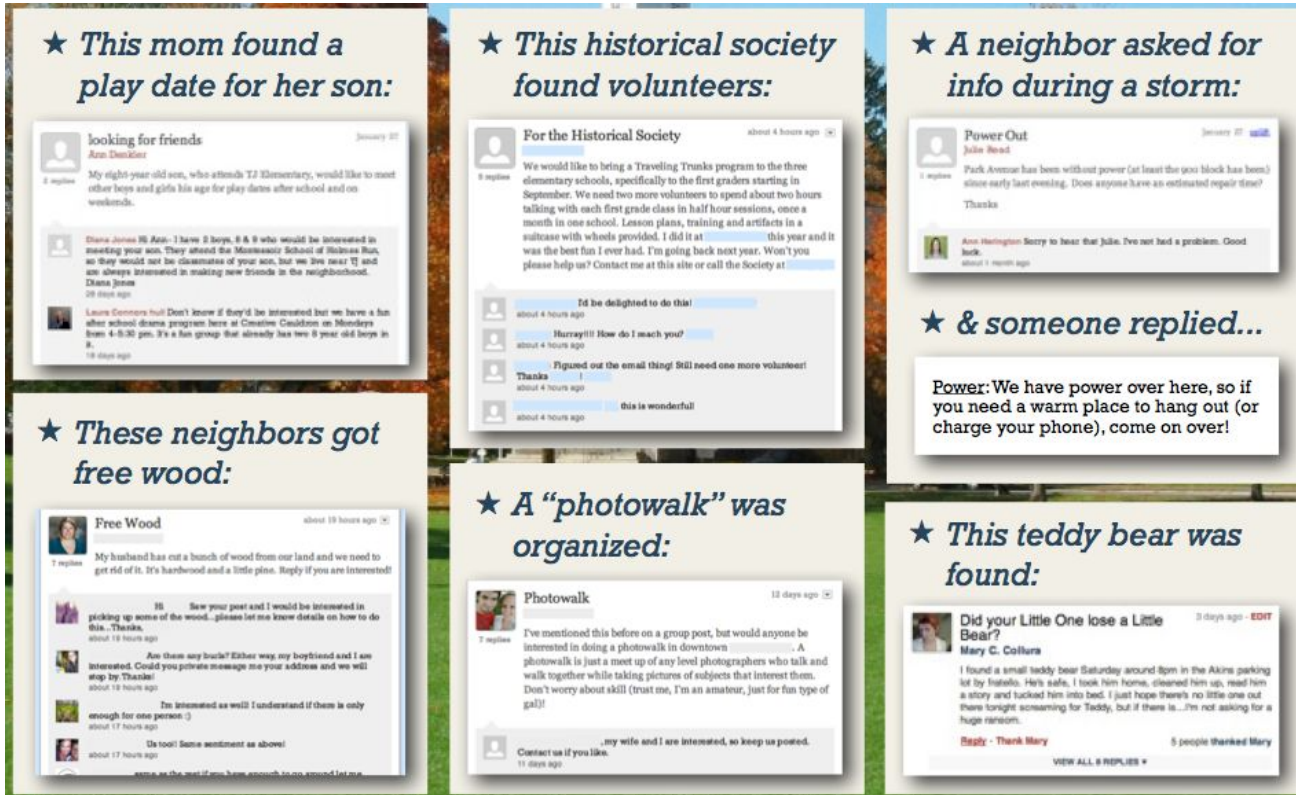
the CommonPlace populations grew steadily. By 2012, our top three towns averaged 27.34% household participation in CommonPlace, with 8 posts a day and 11,309 monthly visits.



Our beta test was: spotlighted in a [blog post](#) by the Harvard Kennedy School's Saguaro Seminar on Civic Engagement in America; featured in [various reports](#) throughout the country; and given a community-building award at the Falls Church City Council chambers. After the beta ended, The government of the town of Warwick missed CommonPlace so much that they have [organized a group](#) to build their own version.

# Neighborhood Magic

Numbers alone cannot tell the story of CommonPlace. What really mattered to us was producing great civic interactions (and even better: in-person neighborhood meetups!):



## Technology + Organizing Principles

The success of CommonPlace's pilot was -- and any future revitalization of CommonPlace will be -- driven by an obsession with technology design and community organizing.

### Technology principles:

- We believe in **integrated networks**. Single service civic sites -- for example, those just for connecting with government or just for connecting with snow shoveling -- often fail because they cannot organize a critical mass. Like Facebook, Craigslist, and local newspapers, CommonPlace aims to be a one-stop shop for multiple forms of civic engagement. That way, you can have  : you come to the site to sell your couch, but see an event announcement for a neighborhood potluck.
- We believe in **ladders of engagement**. Civic technology that relies on users to actively check into the site daily do not work. That is why with CommonPlace, you register and you're done: immediately you start receiving daily email bulletins with posts written by your neighbors. Once you are locked in to

receiving the daily bulletins, you organically move up the ladder of engagement: from reading to replying to posting to creating a page for your civic group to leading the conversation.

- We believe in **bounded networks**. Civic institutions should not only be neutral tools for individuals to use for their own ends. To survive, they need to be organizations that you , that have members (not users), and that expect members to give back, as well as take from the network. That's why a town's CommonPlace is a closed network that you join and become a member of, not an open tool that you only use when you need it.
- We believe in **real people**. In-person civic institutions involve real people with real faces and real names, who are held accountable for their participation. That is the only way trust can be built. That's why each town's CommonPlace requires members to register with their real names and photos.

## Organizing principles:

- We believe in **place-based** (not space-based) **organizing**. CommonPlaces are not organized to connect you with the neighbors within a certain radius of your house. Rather, like town bulletins and local newspapers of old, they are mapped onto real-world communities -- towns, villages, small cities, and large neighborhoods within big cities -- and serve the whole community, not just you.
- We believe in **real world community organizing**. The best civic technologies are alloys that mix in-person and online organizing. That is why we organize people onto CommonPlace the old fashioned way: knocking on doors, tabling at farmers' markets, going to civic meetings, and getting buy-in from existing organizations.
- We believe in **distributed power**. No one company should have the power over our towns' local information infrastructure. That is why we encourages towns to host their CommonPlace platform on their own servers and modify our open source code to fit their own needs.
- We believe in **open source development**. No single group of technologists knows what is best for every town. That is why we believe in open source development: building the CommonPlace kernel that outlines the civic platform, but encouraging volunteer developers to build versions and plugins that meet their own town's needs.

# The Laboratory for Civic Technology

The original expansion of our pilot was structured as a for-profit startup. We soon discovered this would not work: first, our devotion to community organizing did not fit the rapid growth models that Silicon Valley investors demanded; second, the idea of building civic life online inside of a for-profit entity did not sit well with us, with neighbors or with town governments.

That's why, in 2015, we launched the **Laboratory for Civic Technology**, a 501(c)3 non-profit with a mission to harness the internet to revitalize local community in America. The Laboratory's first task is reviving CommonPlace.



**Ricky Porco** is the co-founder of the Laboratory for Civic Technology. He adds significant grassroots organizing experience and an unmatched devotion to civic technology to our team. Starting with pickup games of basketball on the playground as a kid, Ricky always took great pleasure in organizing people around him and building community. His enthusiasm for improving communication on a local level compelled him to become a leader of the CommonPlace movement in its earliest days, and his commitment to building helpful and useful civic technology has grown stronger every day since. Through his work in civic technology Ricky has developed a distinct appreciation for the fact that change of any great magnitude starts locally, right here in our own backyards. Ricky is a proud New Yorker and alumni of James Madison University,



**Pete Davis** is the co-founder of the Laboratory for Civic Technology. He has co-founded a variety of civic projects: Harvard Thinks Big, a popular annual event that brings together professors to share their big ideas on one night in front of the Harvard community; the Progressive Alternative, an online magazine for Millennial Democratic policy; and Getaway, the nation's first-ever venture-backed tiny house startup. From 2013-2014, he served as the labor and poverty coordinator for Ralph Nader's Center for Study of Responsive Law. He graduated from Harvard College in 2012 and is currently a student at Harvard Law School. At night, you can find Pete playing folk music and bopping around the Boston alternative stand up circuit.



**Mark Malazarte** is the senior designer of the Laboratory for Civic Technology. Currently he is working as Senior UX Designer at Dow Jones, assisting the Data Science team in creating data products. When not designing, Mark's passion lies in cinema and filmmaking, having studied under legendary documentary filmmaker Albert Maysles at the Maysles Documentary Center, a non-profit cinema in the heart of Harlem, New York City.



**Jason Berlinsky** is the senior technologist of the Laboratory for Civic Technology. He is the managing partner of Barefoot Coders, a startup and enterprise software engineering consultancy specializing in building technology-driven businesses. He has worked with the Laboratory for Civic Technology team since 2010, building applications to foster civic growth and empowerment. His expertise is in bringing data- and technology-driven operations to companies that can utilize it to enhance their operations, a passion which was founded in the early days of CommonPlace, when minimal technology existed in the wild to enable neighbors to connect, and to enable organizers to better facilitate those connections. Jason graduated from the University of Michigan in 2014, and currently resides in New York City.



**Andrew Sears** is the strategic communications director for the Laboratory for Civic Technology. He is passionate about exploring how cultural and political systems can be reformed to elevate people towards holistically thriving lives. This passion has led him through an exciting career in electoral politics, grassroots advocacy, and nonprofit strategy, and has most recently compelled him to co-found [PurposedSpace](#), a strategic consulting firm for social impact leaders. Andrew is an action-oriented idealist who longs for a revival of flourishing local communities and a rediscovery of true friendship in 21st-century America. When he's not working, he's probably reading or cooking dinner for friends. He graduated summa cum laude from Biola University, where he studied political science and the Great Books, and now lives in Los Angeles with his wife.

## Budget

ITEMS	COST	NOTES
Software Development	\$80,000	One-year salary for Rails software developer. Six months of software development to revive site + six month to make site durable so it can be maintained by volunteer developers.
Server and Technology	\$5,000	Six months of server and misc. technology costs.
Organizing Costs	\$15,000	Six month salary for one community organizer to organize residents of five pilot towns back onto CommonPlace platform.
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$100,000</b>	

## Timeline + Deliverables

DATE	DELIVERABLE
January 2017	Software developer hired
January 2017 - June 2017	Full-time software developer and volunteer development team work to build revived CommonPlace platform
July 4, 2017	CommonPlace platform re-launched in five pilot towns; Full-time community organizer hired
Fall 2017	Full-time community organizer organizes residents of five pilot towns back onto CommonPlace platform; Full-time software developer works to make CommonPlace platform flexible and durable for expansion
Winter 2017	CommonPlace actively used in 5 pilot towns; CommonPlace platform prepared for expansion to more towns; CommonPlace financially sustainable in each pilot town, with server costs paid for by community sponsors
2018 and Beyond	Laboratory of Civic Technology expands CommonPlace nationwide, inviting towns and software developers to participate in spreading the model.



## Find Out More

Visit [www.CivicTech.us](http://www.CivicTech.us) to stay in the loop with the **Laboratory for Civic Technology**.

### Contact the Laboratory for Civic Technology:

- Pete Davis, co-founder / [Pete@CivicTech.us](mailto:Pete@CivicTech.us) / 347-453-3135
- Ricky Porco, co-founder / 914-406-9978
- Jason Berlinsky, senior technologist / 407-404-4603
- Mark Malazarte, senior designer / 973-933-1487
- Andrew Sears, senior communications / 949-230-2651

### Video clips about our CommonPlace pilot:

- Neighbors discussing CommonPlace in Falls Church:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GIydXPH3Eo>
- CommonPlace on Michigan local news: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NsTypSRO4rc>
- CommonPlace on North Carolina local news: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yaW67fAUB4Q>
- CommonPlace on local talk show: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6yD\\_MCgyFBI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6yD_MCgyFBI)
- CommonPlace pitched to the Falls Church, Virginia City Council:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eGq38knVdHA>

### News stories about our CommonPlace pilot:

- Robert Putnam's Saguaro Seminar blog post about CommonPlace:  
<https://socialcapital.wordpress.com/2011/11/15/ourcommonplacenextdoor-using-technology-to-connect-neighbors/>
- BostInno article on CommonPlace's efforts to use the web to revitalize community:  
<http://bostinno.streetwise.co/2012/07/05/commonplace-looks-to-revitalize-community-with-their-online-platform-that-connects-neighbors-offline/>
- Falls Church Times article on the launch of CommonPlace in Falls Church, Virginia:  
<http://fallschurchtimes.com/26271/a-common-place-for-the-city/>
- CommonPlace mentioned in Harvard President Drew Gilpin Faust's Baccalaureate speech to the Harvard Class of 2012 ("your class...started a web platform for community engagement"):  
<http://www.harvard.edu/president/2012-baccalaureate-service-updraft-inexplicable-luck>