



CivicLab Aims to Reinvent How Activism—and Democracy—Works in Chicago

Organization hopes to be new way of looking civic engagement and democracy in 21st century

By [Mark W. Anderson](#) - Monday, Feb 17, 2014

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It's an age-old problem activists face in a city like Chicago: How do you explain something like the need for TIF reform, with its decades of history, multitudes of players and complex financial data, if you've only got someone's attention for 10 or 15 minutes?

More importantly, how do you get them engaged enough in that short amount of time to want to do something about it?

If you're Tom Tresser of Chicago's [CivicLab](#), the answer is simple: throw out the old ways of thinking and talking about the problem and embrace new tools such as data mining, social media, crowd sourcing and collaboration to make a difference.

In fact, from Tresser's perspective, CivicLab, located in an old fire station in the West Loop, is nothing short of a new way of looking at how civic engagement and democracy works in the 21st century. Tresser and his partner, Benjamin Sugar, started CivicLab in June of 2013 as a kind of "laboratory for democracy" that combines classes, advocacy projects, collaboration spaces and a clearinghouse of activists' ideas, all in an effort to reinvent from the ground up what civic engagement means for activists and citizens across the city.

For his part, Tresser, 61, got his start in Chicago politics by working in the campaigns of Hank Rubin for 50th ward alderman in 1991 and liberal reformer Dick Simpson's run for Congress against Dan Rostenkowski in 1992. He also was one of the lead organizers in the "No Games" movement of 2009, which challenged former Mayor Daley's assumptions about how much a successful Olympic bid would Chicago and who in the city would profit from the games.

He met Sugar, 33, in 2012, although it took a while for the reality of CivicLab to get off the ground. Both came to the idea of civic engagement and political activism from rich and varied backgrounds, neither of which was really grounded in old-school ways of politics or activism. While living in Boston, for example, Sugar worked with a group that breaks down the walls between everyday communities and science, and serves a key organizer with [Between the Bars](#), a paper-based blogging platform for people who are incarcerated.

Together, they both knew they wanted to bring new ideas, new vitality and new tools to the critical task of civic engagement. And they both knew the only way to do so was to break down the barriers that exist between activists and ideas, between disciplines and abilities and between the past and the future. CivicLab ended up being their own vision of how to accomplish that.

“CivicLab is a working space where we want people who are interested in making the world a better place to come and work regardless of whether you call yourself an educator or activist, academic or coder,” Says Tresser. “And if you just want to be with some people who care about society, care about Chicago and are very active and dynamic, this is also a place to come and work.”

As its guiding philosophy, CivicLab relies on three main areas of focus—teaching, collaboration and tool-building—all of which came together in the [TIF Illumination Project](#), which just celebrated it’s first year.

Utilizing over eight different sets of data and using data mining, GIS coding, map making, investigatory journalism and crowd-sourced organizing, CivicLab was able to almost single-handedly move the conversation in Chicago around how Tax Incremental Financing districts, or TIFs, are used, how they affect those who live in their boundaries and who profits from them.

Through a series of public meetings and innovative graphics and maps, CivicLab helped show people across the city that as much as \$1.7 billion in unused TIF funds were available, and understand how big the slice of the pie was for their own ward or neighborhood—often in short, easy to understand terms that allowed them to grasp a complex topic in a new way.

But CivicLab sees itself as more than just another education-focused group out to show Chicagoans how their city is actually run. It also wants to help train the next generation of activists who may understand the ins and outs of their own issues but not now how to connect to a wider world of ideas, resources and fellow activists.

To help fill what it sees as key gaps in understanding, CivicLab holds classes in everything from how to research an elected official, how to run for local office, nonprofit event planning or even understanding how to use art for social change.

Further, its very space is designed to foster collaboration and cross-pollination of kinds. For a small fee, activists or advocacy groups can rent a desk on a monthly basis, hold a meeting or utilize resources, all the while using CivicLab as a clearinghouse for information on activities, projects, events or more.

“CivicLab fills a really big gap for small organizations on shoestring budgets who need meeting space, especially when library hours are being cut back and public schools are no longer available as meeting spaces,” said Rebecca Reynolds, executive director at Chicago Votes, a lead tenant at CivicLab. “The office is regularly full with folks coming in after hours. It’s been incredibly effective at creating this kind of space.”

As the lead tenant, Chicago Votes, a group working to engage younger Chicagoans in the political process, helped bring CivicLab into existence when both organizations were looking for a space to operate and decided to jump in together. For her part, Reynolds says the place works exactly as its designed, and then some.

“It’s really great to have co-workers in this space working on different projects in the same realm of politics and democratic activism,” she says. “It means that when I’m getting stuck on a problem and it’s uniquely an organizing problem or a policy problem, I can take a moment and go to the desk of another organizer who has ideas around a challenge I have been grinding my gears on and get a fresh perspective.”