Code for America Summit: The Future of Civic Engagement

As you might expect from someone who's passionate about collaboration for social good, I'm interested in open government. I always thought that I understood what open government was about: what was possible, what was happening, and why. I get what it means for government to be a platform rather than a vending machine and why open data is about so much more than transparency.

What I realized at last week's [Code for America Summit](#) was that, while I may be interested in open government, I don't actually know anything about it. That made the event an absolute delight for me, an opportunity to spend two full days with passionate people who are deeply immersed in this stuff, geeks and wonks both in and outside of government. It was *fun*.

It would take me a month to write about all of the cool people I met, all of the cool projects I saw, and all of the new ideas that are percolating in my head. Instead, I want to

share two quick takeaways here. For a longer list of nuggets, you can check out my [tweets from the event](#).

First, [Code for America](#) is awesome. (Full disclosure: I'm an [advisor](#) to the organization, although I've had a grand total of zero to do with its success, so I feel like I can be unbiased in saying these things.) As the name implies, it's loosely modeled after [Teach for America](#), only the goal is to bring coders and designers inside city government. It's bringing innovation into city government.

At the Summit, several of the [2011 Fellows](#) showed off some of their [projects](#), and they are astonishing in their creativity and quality. I loved all of the projects, but my three favorite were [reroute.it](#), [Iconathon](#), and [Open311 Dashboard](#).

Code for America is awesome for a lot of reasons, not the least of which is founder and executive director, [Jen Pahlka](#). Jen has done a lot of things right, but the number one thing, in my opinion, is that she's brought together the best people from two different communities: tech and local government. There are a lot of similar efforts in other sectors that are languishing, because they haven't made any real efforts to bridge communities and build relationships.

Second, civic engagement should be about more than attending meetings. [Peter Koht](#), Santa Cruz's Economic Development Coordinator, said it best when he showed a picture of someone surfing and a picture of a city meeting, and asked, "Where would you rather be?"

It's not just in government where this is a problem. In many sectors, we conflate engagement or collaboration with meetings. Frankly, I think that many people in my profession are guilty of this mindset, and it's a problem. Do you need a new strategy? Let's hold a meeting. Want to engage with your community? Meeting. Are you having difficulties getting your team to work together? Meeting.

On the one hand, meetings — when facilitated well — are tremendously powerful. We pride ourselves on being great at designing and facilitating meetings. My Groupaya co-founder, [Kristin Cobble](), is one of the best in the business, and Rebecca Petzel is a rising star.

On the other hand, engagement isn't just about meetings. We try our best to know and apply this, but it's not always easy. The Summit offered great inspiration for different ways to do that.