Co-Creating Urban Commons

An **Engaged Cities Award** case study created by Cities of Service in partnership with 2018 award winner Bologna, Italy.

Executive Summary

Historically, Bologna, Italy, was a city with strong civic engagement, but citizen participation had decreased and onerous bureaucratic requirements had made it difficult for people to effect change in their communities. The city passed a regulation to streamline civic engagement, allowing citizens and private organizations to sign collaboration pacts with the city in order to improve public space. Bologna also created labs in the city's six districts that served as hubs of innovation and collaboration with citizens. In just a few years, city officials have seen a marked increase in citizen engagement — about 480 collaboration pacts have been implemented to date, and more than 14,000 people voted in the first year of participatory budgeting.

CITIES OF SERVICE

ENGAGED CITIES AWARD
BY CITIES OF SERVICE

The Challenge

Bologna, Italy, a center of the resistance during World War II, has a long history of civic engagement.

Decades ago, a national law reformed governance of the suburbs and created distinct districts with their own councils and presidents in Bologna — essentially the districts became smaller versions of the city government. But in recent years, engagement decreased, and the districts were more focused on management than on citizen participation. After the European economic crisis hit in 2008, trust in politics and government leaders disintegrated. Many people withdrew from civic life and relied on their peers rather than put trust in institutions. In the 2014 regional elections, only 38 percent of eligible voters went to the polls, compared to 68 percent during the previous election.

Bologna also has a large migrant population, which can be more disengaged from traditional institutions than native Bolognese. Of the 388,000 people living in Bologna, nearly 15 percent were born outside Italy. City officials say that every 10 years, 25 percent of the population turns over. Many migrants come for work or other opportunities but don't necessarily develop roots, and many of them ultimately move elsewhere in Europe. Immigrants must live in Italy for 10 years to achieve Italian citizenship, which allows them to vote. And while the city is home to Europe's oldest university, the University of Bologna, many students don't vote because they wish to keep their official residences in their home cities.

Underlying this lack of engagement was the fact that Bologna regulations made it difficult, if not impossible, for citizens to make changes in their communities. Bureaucracy meant that making small improvements to public spaces involved red tape and working with several city departments, discouraging engagement and increasing apathy among residents. In 2011, Virginio Merola was elected mayor of Bologna, and his office made a concerted effort to change that.

The Solution

In 2014, the city council passed the "regulation on public collaboration between citizens and the city for the care and regeneration of urban commons," which allowed citizens and private organizations to sign collaboration pacts with the city in order to improve public space, green areas, and abandoned buildings.

The city took a layered approach to the innovations: The regulation served as the foundation for additional programs and was crucial to getting them off the ground. Then the city created offices, programs and processes to facilitate residents' work to improve and sustain their neighborhoods. Integrating the various programs allowed participants to work together more seamlessly and enabled the city to foster additional civic engagement.

In 2015, the city reorganized the districts in Bologna, creating six distinct territories as an extension of the city government. The districts, which each have their own councils and presidents, act as local hubs that are attuned to neighborhoods' individual needs. The newly formed districts better allocate the city's resources and have spurred a renewed sense of community and shared purpose. As an outgrowth of this reform, the city also created six laboratories, one in each district, to foster connections between local government and the

people of Bologna. The labs serve as centers of collaboration where staff members help citizens refine and develop their ideas. One staff member is assigned to each district, which helps them build relationships and maintain an ongoing connection.

The mayor also established a Civic Imagination Office, which oversees the labs and works to boost citizen participation, and opened up a participatory budgeting process. This allows all residents, regardless of how long they have lived in the city and regardless their place of official residence, to propose and vote on the citizen-led projects that they most want to see come to life. The city also made its Incredibol! program — a yearly competition that supports local startups — part of the overall effort to boost engagement and make it easy for citizens to design and improve their communities.

Nuts and Bolts: How it Works

The New Regulation

Before any of the creativity and collaboration could take root, city officials had to do something about the red tape. After Mayor Merola came into office, city officials developed a strategy they called Collaborare Bologna. It was designed to enable collaboration between community members and city government, encouraging both groups to share responsibility for maintaining public spaces and allocating resources.

"It was all born from a bench, because a citizen asked for permission to repaint a bench. We realized that in order to give permission to repaint the bench, we had to go through five different sectors of the municipal machinery — five different authorizations. We began to understand that something was not working."

BOLOGNA MAYOR VIRGINIO MEROLA

City officials spent two years on pilot projects, experimenting with collaboration in three neighborhoods. The mayor's office worked closely with consultants from LabGov at Rome's LUISS Guido Carli University to develop and pass a law called the "regulation on public collaboration between citizens and the city for the care and regeneration of urban commons." This regulation, passed in 2014, cut down the bureaucracy and streamlined the process for citizens who wanted to improve their neighborhoods.

Before the regulation, a resident who wanted to paint a bench would have had to contact five city agencies. And that isn't hypothetical — in 2011, a group of citizens wanted to repaint a bench in their neighborhood to make it more welcoming, but they were unable to. It was that request that kicked off the city's push to simplify regulations and change the way it governed the urban commons.

"It was all born from a bench," explained Mayor Merola, "because a citizen asked for permission to repaint a bench. We realized that in order to give permission to repaint the bench, we had to

go through five different sectors of the municipal machinery — five different authorizations. We began to understand that something was not working." Now, just one agency, the Active Citizenship Office, handles all of those requests.

Collaboration pacts are key to implementing this new regulation. The pacts start from project proposals submitted by citizens — whether an individual, a group of people, a community, or a nonprofit. They can be a one-off, like painting a bench or planting flowers, or a larger, ongoing project like rehabbing an abandoned building.

The collaboration pacts have a budget of about 150,000 euros (US$170,000) each year, which comes out of the city budget. The city provides a technical assessment for each proposal, determines its feasibility, and conducts political evaluation to see how it fits with other projects the city is planning.

Part of the evaluation process is determining exactly what the proposal requires from the city, be it tools, raw materials, marketing, funding or administrative support. Once the city signs on to a collaboration pact, it acts as a partner in the endeavor, providing support throughout implementation.

The Active Citizenship Office, which receives all of the collaboration pact proposals, is part of city hall and has a staff of 12. The process of evaluating and implementing proposals includes people from all departments in city hall; around 40 city staffers are involved in some way.

As of October 2018, about 480 collaboration pacts have been implemented, including community gardens, a mural on the walls of a community school, and the restoration of an old building to be used as a community center.

A community group worked with the city to turn a building that had been **abandoned for 30 years** into Instabile Portaza, a community center and a hub for events and creative activities.

One of the more innovative pacts created "LEILA — the objects library." The community members behind the project knew that many household items might only be used a few times a year — the rest of the time they sit idle. So they proposed a sharing facility, where someone could bring one of their own items — for instance, a drill or an air mattress — and check out something else that they needed.

The city provided space for the library, which it was able to do for a number of other pacts. The local government owns many buildings that are underused or neglected because it doesn't have the resources to restore and maintain them. Being able to offer the space for a nominal charge, in exchange for groups restoring and maintaining them, can help regenerate entire city blocks.

To facilitate all of the collaboration pacts, the city created a website, called Partecipa (partecipa.comune.bologna.it) that lays out the requirements for submitting a pact, gives guidelines on what issues the city wants to target, provides an easy way for people to submit proposals, and shares the pacts' outcomes.

It was a natural step for the city to launch this platform. Bologna has a long history of using the internet to boost engagement: In 1995, it was the first Italian city to launch an online civic network and give all of its residents free access to the internet.

"We discovered a new point of view of how we can work with the people and with the community. Not from the top level but from the bottom and with them."

BOLOGNA DEPUTY MAYOR MATTEO LEPORE

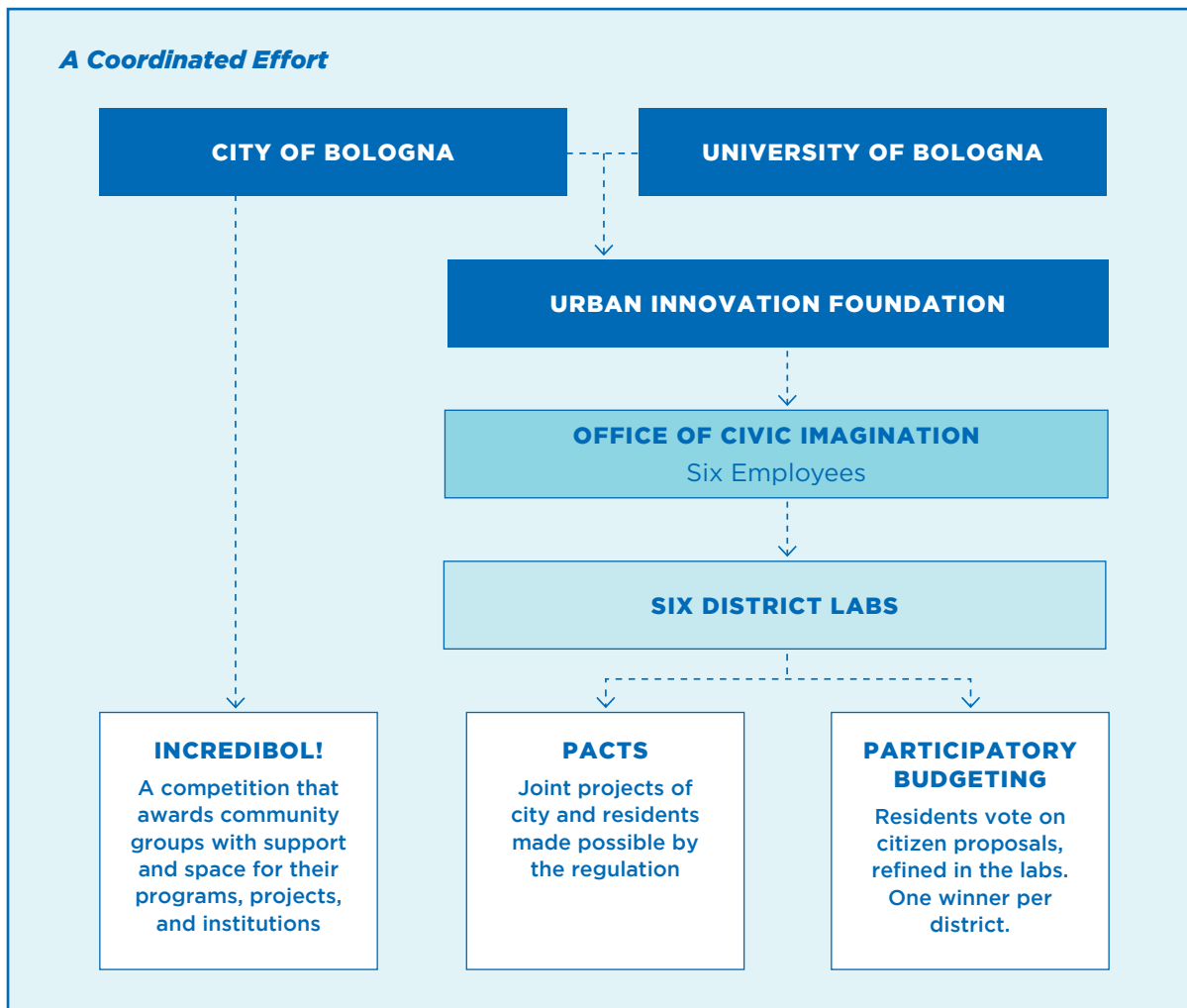### Civic Imagination Office and District Labs

In 2016, Deputy Mayor Matteo Lepore was appointed to oversee "civic imagination" in addition to culture, heritage, sport, and tourism. Lepore believed that the city government needed to reimagine policies and tools so that Bologna's citizens would feel a shared responsibility in taking care of public space and using resources sustainably.

"We discovered a new point of view of how we can work with the people and with the community," said Lepore. "Not from the top level but from the bottom and with them."

In 2017, this evolved into the Civic Imagination Office, which is housed in the Fondazione Innovazione Urbana, or the Urban Innovation Foundation. The foundation itself was an outgrowth of the Urban Center Bologna, which was founded in 2005 as a place for citizens and groups to discuss urban issues. As Bologna ramped up its push for civic engagement, the city realized it needed to expand the participatory processes, according to Teresa Carlone, a community manager at the foundation. In 2018, the Urban Center became the Fondazione Innovazione Urbana, a joint endeavor between the municipal government and the University of Bologna. The Civic Imagination Office, with 13 full-time employees, became one of three departments within the foundation.

Shortly after establishing the Civic Imagination Office, the mayor's office created six district labs, one in each district, to encourage collaboration and engagement at the community level.

The labs are a coordinated effort between the Civic Imagination Office, the Governance Unit of the City of Bologna, and the sociology department at the University of Bologna.

A Coordinated Effort

CITY OF BOLOGNA

UNIVERSITY OF BOLOGNA

URBAN INNOVATION FOUNDATION

OFFICE OF CIVIC IMAGINATION
Six Employees

SIX DISTRICT LABS

INCREDIBOL!
A competition that awards community groups with support and space for their programs, projects, and institutions

PACTS
Joint projects of city and residents made possible by the regulation

PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING
Residents vote on citizen proposals, refined in the labs. One winner per district.

Carlone is one of six employees focused almost exclusively on the district labs. She oversees one district, which is in a suburban area of Bologna. She said engaging citizens who live outside of the urban core has been a focus of the Fondazione Innovazione Urbana and the district labs.

"We try to understand and get close to the life of the district as much as possible," she said. "We try to know the people in the district — what their activity is, what their community is. We want to get as close as possible to know them and engage them."

It's all part of what they call the "proximity approach."

"We try to meet them in their spaces," Carlone said. "Instead of telling them, 'Come to us,' the proximity approach is we come to you."

Many of the more formal meetings are held with existing associations and meeting spaces in the district that focus on areas like culture, youth, sports, or the elderly. Carlone and her counterparts hold meetings roughly once a month to hear about the community's needs or discuss the participatory budgeting process.

The community managers' presence in their districts goes far beyond monthly meetings. They attend local events, street fairs — basically, "everything they organize, we try to attend," said Carlone, who is the main point of contact for her district and the primary person doing outreach. During the months when participatory budgeting is in full swing, she said, she might meet with people every day. "The majority of people in the district have my home number," she said.

Carlone sees this as both a positive and a negative — people know her, actively engage with her and see her as an approachable representative of Bologna, which is important for ongoing relationship development and engagement. On the other hand, it creates a relationship that would have to be entirely rebuilt if she left or her job changed.

Since Bologna adopted the new regulation, citizens have implemented **more than 480 pacts**.

The labs are effective at strengthening engagement and are able to help citizens and organizations fine-tune their ideas and determine how best to accomplish their goals. For instance, a proposal might work well as a collaboration pact, and the labs might be able to connect several people interested in the same project; or perhaps it's a creative endeavor that should be submitted to the city's Incredibol! competition; or it might be something to submit to Bologna's participatory budgeting process. City staffers from departments like public works and urban planning also provide feedback on the logistical and technical elements of proposals, which helps make them more viable and eliminates other potential roadblocks as they get further along in the planning process.

"We have created different tools of participation," said Francesca Martinese, head of the International Relations and Projects office for the city of Bologna. "The district labs are a way that we can advise on which is best."

The six districts each have a central office, which helps the city assist with the participatory processes as well. Carlone said they're still in their infancy — they were created in 2016 as part of a broader set of reforms — but ideally will shoulder more of the work engaging citizens from the districts.

In just over a year, there have been more than 70 district lab meetings with more than 1,700 citizens participating.

Incredibol!

In 2010, city officials launched Incredibol!, a competitive program for startups in creative and cultural industries. The goal was to experiment with new uses for public space, while encouraging entrepreneurial endeavors in the city.

The application process is extensive, requiring information on everything from target audience and marketing strategy to team members' professional experience and partner involvement. Applicants are also asked to provide details on how they plan to fund the operation, as well as what they anticipate the social and economic impact to be (e.g., it will create jobs or provide vocational training).

A commission reviews all the applications, judging on six areas (with a maximum of 100 points): overall quality of the project, team composition, technical feasibility and environmental sustainability, economic and/or social impact, innovation, and clarity of the presentation.

There are a variety of prizes for the winners, depending on what they most need. Some receive cash of up to 10,000 euros (US$11,300), others receive free space, others might receive training, access to consultants, or marketing and communications assistance.

Incredibol! has transformed a dilapidated train station into Dynamo, a self-sustaining bike rental and community center, and an abandoned market into the Mercato Sonato, a multi-purpose space, which makes classical music more accessible to residents.

In six years, the program has received 621 submissions, named 96 winners and assigned 28 spaces. Groups who are awarded space typically get an eight-year lease. They don't have to pay rent but are required to pay for utilities, registration, and insurance.

The group Salvaiciclisti-Bologna proposed Dynamo in 2012. They wanted a place for secure bike parking, as well as a community hub to promote sustainable urban mobility. As one of the Incredibol! winners, the project received the historic space underneath the Pincio staircase leading up to Bologna's Montagnola park. Over the years, the large rooms under the staircase served a variety of purposes, including sheltering Bolognese citizens from bombs during World War II. It was unused and abandoned when Dynamo took it over in 2015. The group cleaned and rehabilitated the building to create a bike park and community space.

Today, Dynamo functions as a self-sustaining cooperative, with 12 members and several employees. Among other things, it serves as a hub for a vegetable co-op and courier service, and it houses one outpost of the LEILA objects library. It is located near the central train station, and commuters from the suburbs park their bikes there for a fee and take the train home. It also has a cafe on-site and offers bike rentals and repairs, which helps keep it economically viable.

The Mercato Sonato is another example of how Bologna has reimagined urban space. The Orchestra Senzaspine was a 2014 Incredibol! winner and was awarded the Mercato San Donato, a covered market that had been vacant for years.

The multipurpose space now gives life to classical music in a variety of forms — from orchestral concerts to student competitions — with the goal of making classical music accessible to all of Bologna's residents. The space is also a launching pad for musicians — many take classes at the Mercato Sonato to help them become more employable by other orchestras. Similar to Dynamo, the space serves as a community hub with a reach beyond classical music. It hosts conferences, dancing classes, pop-up shops and workshops for local residents.

Dynamo and Orchestra Senzaspine are just two examples of projects proposed through the Incredibol! process by residents who had ideas for how to engage more people and reactivate public space. Both groups took previously abandoned city-owned buildings and turned them into vibrant community gathering places. The city's formal commitment to civic engagement further cemented the Incredibol! program as a vital part of elevating creative and cultural endeavors in Bologna.

The **urban commons** is the public space, physical and digital, that is collaboratively governed by the city government and citizens and contributes to individual collective well-being.

Participatory Budgeting

In 2017, Bologna's government launched a participatory budgeting process. The city invited citizens to submit proposals for projects that would engage residents and reimagine the urban commons.

At the beginning of the year, district lab managers hold formal meetings in their districts to hear what citizens feel is most urgently needed. As Carlone points out, people on the ground are much more attuned to what's happening at the local level than those in city government, and the district labs try to harness that knowledge and energy.

"They express a need, and then we codesign a project," she said.

She and her counterparts in the Civic Imagination Office essentially function as the bridge between citizens and the city.

"We put them at one table and co-create together," she said. "We write a project: The citizens with the needs and municipality with technical abilities. We say we're combining territorial competencies with technical competencies — that's what you need in order to develop a project that's truly important for the district."

They also go over things like economic sustainability, how long the projects will take to implement, and how they might connect with other projects so they can be combined if appropriate to increase effectiveness and efficiency. Experts from relevant city departments — parks, transportation, public works, etc. — analyze each proposal and determine if it is eligible to move to the voting phase. The panel doesn't have veto power — it just examines whether the proposal meets the city's criteria on things like budget and the proposed public space. If so, it is submitted for a vote.

Crucially, Bologna opened up the voting process for participatory budgeting beyond just citizens — the city allows anyone over 16 who lives, works or goes to school in Bologna to vote — a much larger group than is allowed to vote in municipal elections.

The Civic Imagination Office also brought on nine people between the ages of 18 and 25 to serve as youth ambassadors for the participatory budgeting process. Through the LabUnder program, these volunteers experimented with new ways of communication through social media and other means and did outreach to people their age, including students at the University of Bologna.

"University students could do more to explain to someone their age than someone from the city or the foundation," Martinese said. "It was a very effective side-project to improve participation." It was a boon for the district labs, which were actively trying to engage more young people in the process.

Raising Up Leaders and Renovating Public Space

Virginia Farina thought the empty area along Via Lombardia in her neighborhood would make an excellent greenspace for her neighbors to meet and for her young daughter to play. She submitted a proposal through the participatory budgeting process, and the city helped her refine it. Thanks to her efforts, soon there will be a small park in her neighborhood. "I didn't expect to be a leader," Farina said, "but now I'm a leader in my community."

There were also instances of people taking their own initiative to increase participation all over the city. In one example, residents of Via Abba, a local street, translated the materials about their district's participatory budgeting vote into five languages and put them in the lobbies of all the buildings on the street to make sure that everybody was informed about the vote.

Ultimately, 27 proposals were submitted throughout the participatory budgeting process in 2017, and 14,480 people voted online. Six proposals won — one from each district — splitting 1 million euros (US$1.13 million), which was allocated in the city's budget, to execute their plans. One winning project focused on bike lanes in the Borgo Panigale Reno district — both improving existing infrastructure and adding lanes. Another proposed refurbishing a school's unused gym and locker rooms, turning them into experiential learning labs that brought things like art, drama, music, and technology into the curriculum.

The district labs are key to the success of the participatory budgeting process. The fact that the labs were staffed with people who were able to work with citizens and combine similar projects made the resulting proposals stronger and engaged more people in the final product. Carlone said she was inspired by the collaboration between city officials and citizens.

"When you see the experts from the departments sitting at the same table with citizens, studying maps, looking for common solutions to address their needs, it's a great example of the power of engagement — not only for the population but also for the administration," she said.

The participatory budgeting process was such a success, the city is continuing it this year: There are 33 proposals up for consideration and communities are currently implementing the six proposals from last year.

Bologna's strategy has spread across Italy. Bologna was the first city in Italy to pass a regulation that made it easier for citizens to activate and reclaim urban spaces. Since it was passed in 2014, more than 100 other Italian cities have followed Bologna's lead and adopted similar regulations.

Keys to Success

One of the main reasons for Bologna's success in engaging residents to help them solve problems is that the mayor's office was willing to embrace decentralization. City leadership didn't need its hands in every project — it trusted the Active Citizenship Office, the Civic Imagination Office, and the district labs to work with residents to find the best outcomes. This allowed collaboration to flourish and citizens to feel empowered to propose ideas large and small that would improve their neighborhoods.

The hyperlocal focus is key, because people are most concerned about their own neighborhoods and are willing to invest their time to improve them.

"Every neighborhood has a different history," said Michele D'Alena, head of Civic Imagination at the Fondazione Innovazione Urbana, who coordinates the laboratories. "The secret is to stay with the people in the neighborhood and listen to the people and engage."

D'Alena said it is also important to focus on projects that can show results quickly.

"This kind of engagement can work if you focus on short-term projects," he said. "Citizens want to see the results not in five to 10 years but at a maximum two years. Otherwise, it's not understandable."

Bologna's strategy has spread across Italy. Bologna was the first city in Italy to pass a regulation that made it easier for citizens to activate and reclaim urban spaces. Since it was passed in 2014, more than 100 other Italian cities have followed Bologna's lead and adopted similar regulations.

"By taking a step backwards, we tried to help get more of a vision for the district instead of just individual needs. We tried to involve people in, 'what can the vision of the district be in five years?' That helped citizens not to be focused on their small needs but get to know other people's points of views and have a shared a vision."

TERESA CARLONE, COMMUNITY MANAGER AT URBAN INNOVATION FOUNDATION

With the participatory budgeting process, Carlone said, in the first year, people tended to be a little myopic in talking about what they wanted — for instance, a park directly in front of their house. So this year, the district labs made it a point to hold formal meetings where they discussed the broader vision for the district and encouraged people to think about what would benefit the entire community. They also worked to engage key stakeholders and heads of local organizations before bringing in the citizens at large, which helped define potential projects and community needs from the outset.

"By taking a step backwards, we tried to help get more of a vision for the district instead of just individual needs," Carlone said. "We tried to involve people in, 'what can the vision of the district be in five years?' That helped citizens not to be focused on their small needs but get to know other people's points of views and have a shared a vision."

As a result, she said, the quality of this year's proposals was higher.

The city has seen vastly increased engagement from residents as a result of these efforts over the last few years. Now, it's just a matter of keeping people involved once initial enthusiasm wanes. They're also focused on bringing new people into the conversation, particularly students, young people, and refugees.

"The challenge is to involve different kind of people, not always the same group," Carlone said. She said the most recent participatory budgeting process saw improvement in terms of involvement from different groups. One of the projects proposed in 2018 was put forward by a group of young people, and one was proposed by the Muslim community.

She knows that they need to bring more communities into the process, and plans to do this the same way that she's approached the rest of her district: by meeting them where they are.

"We don't ask them to come to us," she said. "You need different levels of communication, different tools of engagement."

The city continues to refine and expand its efforts to make the city and its public spaces truly governed for the people, with the people.

Cities of Service is an independent nonprofit organization that helps mayors and city leaders tap the knowledge, creativity, and service of citizens to solve public problems and create vibrant cities. We work with cities to build city-led, citizen-powered initiatives that target specific needs, achieve long-term and measurable outcomes, improve the quality of life for residents, and build stronger cities. Founded in 2009 by New York City Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, Cities of Service supports a coalition of more than 250 cities, representing more than 73 million people across the Americas and Europe.

Join us at **citiesofservice.org** or follow us on Twitter **@citiesofservice**.

THE ENGAGED CITIES AWARD

The Cities of Service Engaged Cities Award shines a light on cities that are collaborating with citizens to meet pressing local challenges in diverse and creative ways. Bologna, Italy was one of three winners of the inaugural Engaged Cities Award in 2018.

Each year, Cities of Service recognizes cities that are effectively involving their citizens to do things like reduce community violence, produce better budgets, create safer streets, and build stronger communities. The strategies of the Engaged Cities Award winners and finalists are models for other cities around the world to learn from, adapt, and improve upon. Cities of Service works with winners and finalists to develop resources to share with other cities so they can implement similar programs in their own communities.