An interesting behavioral phenomenon may be manifesting itself in Salt Lake County. The Hawthorne effect, named after a series of experiments conducted during the 1920s and 30s, maintains “that people’s behavior and performance change following new or increased attention.” This could explain what’s been occurring in the unincorporated areas of Salt Lake County as a result of state legislation that required county officials to consider citizen input before moving on a very sensitive issue.

House Bill 40 came into existence in 1995 to protect the unincorporated areas of Salt Lake County from being unfairly taken over by existing municipalities. This legislative protection was scheduled to expire, or “sunset,” in 2005, but was extended until 2010 to give county officials an opportunity, as was stipulated in the legislation, to determine the will of the citizens in the townships. Officials from the county worked with the University of Utah’s Center for Public Policy & Administration to develop a survey that allowed citizens to share their opinion on the subject. During this time, community councils that represent the unincorporated townships and areas ran an aggressive education campaign encouraging citizens to let their voices be heard. Thousands of citizens jumped at the chance to be heard and used the survey’s open-ended questions as an opportunity to make policy recommendations regarding the future of their communities. These recommendations were then submitted to county officials who reviewed them along with the results of the survey.

The “increased attention” as manifested in the lengths to which the county was willing to go to obtain its citizens’ opinions, seems to have helped empower citizens, who have been attending community council meetings in higher numbers. Jeff Silvestrini, acting president of the councils’ umbrella organization, the Association for Community Councils Together, and chair of the Olympus Cove Community Council, says he’s never seen anything like it, and believes the increased community involvement is also due, in part, to County Mayor Peter Corroon’s increase of funding to the community councils citizen outreach and education efforts. Rita Lund, outreach coordinator for the East-side unincorporated areas, and former chair of the Canyon Rim Township “agrees. “Two or three years ago, community councils were given 200-300 dollars each year for making copies, etc.” she explains. “Last year, they were given a [combined] total of 180,000 dollars. That money does a lot to tell citizens ‘you matter.’”

With more money to work with and more citizens attending community council meetings, residents of the Salt Lake County’s unincorporated areas are beginning to play an active role in formulating the “municipal priorities” that the chairs of the community councils share during meetings with the three at-large county council members. Citizen volunteers are being recruited in record numbers to serve on exploratory committees designed to investigate the contingencies associated with possible township annexations and incorporations. Others are helping out with community outreach events and preparing educational material for township newspapers.

Most people view the citizen involvement demonstrated during the HB 40 study as extremely positive—particularly on the east side of the county, where the HB 40 mail and phone surveys compelled property owners who had been confused about the complex city and county boundaries in the area to learn more about their municipal surroundings. “People are beginning to see themselves as living in a community,” says Lund, who believes community thinking to be the reason citizens are willing to educate themselves and others on relevant issues—and, in some cases, make policy recommendations.

This brand of citizen activism in the unincorporated communities reminds us that our country is steeped in a political tradition that values a government not only of the people and for the people, but also by the people. Nevertheless, the extent to which citizens should participate in the formulation of public policy feels like unfamiliar territory to many. Now that community councils have garnered substantial citizen support and are being taken seriously by an inclusive county government, many are asking what will happen next? According to Lund, in one of the recent meetings between at-large county council members and the chairs of the
community councils, at-large members brought up one possibility worth noting: eliminating the need for the county council’s ability to overrule the zoning change and conditional use permit recommendations provided by the unincorporated communities’ planning and zoning commission. A change like this would move unelected citizens up a few steps in the policy making process. With the momentum some of these citizens' groups have gained, the sky could be the limit.