

Citizen Participation in Decision-Making: Is it Worth the Effort?

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It is widely argued that increased community participation in government decision-making produces many important benefits. Dissent is rare: It is difficult to envision anything but positive outcomes from citizens joining the policy process, collaborating with others, and reaching consensus to bring about positive social and environmental change. This article, motivated by contextual problems encountered in a participatory watershed management initiative, reviews the citizen participation literature and analyzes key considerations in determining whether community participation is an effective policy-making tool. We list conditions under which community participation may be costly and ineffective and when it can thrive and produce the greatest gains in effective citizen governance. From the detritus of an unsuccessful citizen-participation effort, we arrive at a more-informed approach to guide policy makers in choosing a decision-making process that is appropriate for a community's particular needs.

'CBEP (Community-Based Environmental Protection) is designed to maximize the use of scarce resources, encourage local support, and consider the economic well-being of communities.'

— U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
(1996: 1)

Introduction

Notwithstanding the ambiguous mention of utilizing scarce resources, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) should be commended for its efforts to incorporate more citizen involvement in environmental protection programs (Fiorino 2000). With improved community relations as a motivating goal, the EPA pushed for national and regional enhancements in environmental decision-making throughout the latter half of the 1990s. This ambitious effort was not limited to the EPA, nor to just environmental management. At all levels of government, citizen participation programs were launched, beginning in the 1950s (Day 1997), with the underlying assumption that if citizens became actively involved as participants in their democracy, the governance that emerged from this process would be more democratic and more effective.

Arguments for enhanced citizen participation often rest on the merits of the process and the belief that an engaged citizenry is better than a passive citizenry (King, Feltey and Susel 1998, Putnam 1995, Arnstein 1969). With citizen participation, formulated policies might be more realistically grounded in citizen preferences, the public might become more sympathetic evaluators of the tough decisions that government administrators have to make, and the improved support from the public might create a less divisive, combative populace to govern and regulate. However, incorporating citizen input into agency decision-making is not a costless process. This article articulates not just potential benefits but also potential social and economic costs of community participation, so that policy-makers can better predict the usefulness of a citizen participation initiative.

The article first explores the potentially wide-ranging benefits of enhanced community participation. Drawbacks to community participation are evaluated next, including a brief discussion of relative costs of citizen participation versus representational decision-making. We then describe an attempt to incorporate community participation in a management program for a degraded urban watershed, and note the characteristics that made this project unusually challenging. We highlight place-based characteristics that serve as predictors for success or failure of community participation programs. In effect, we take a step back from the ‘how-to’ literature to determine ‘whether-to’ at all.

Advantages of Citizen Participation

Citizen participation in public affairs ‘seems to hold a sacrosanct role in U.S. political culture’ (Day 1997, 1). The enthusiasm for incorporating a role for citizens into democratic decision-making is not limited to the U.S., as many other countries have extensive initiatives in place that involve citizens in the governing process (for example, Nylén 2002, Trenam 2000, Buchy and Race 2001, OECD 2001). A central tenet to the enthusiasm accorded to citizen participation is the belief that citizen involvement in a Jeffersonian democracy will produce more public-preference decision-making on the part of the administrators and a better appreciation of one’s larger community on the part of the public (Stivers 1990, Oldfield 1990, Box 1998). King and Stivers (1998) suggest that improved citizen participation could stem the deterioration in public trust evidenced by widespread hostility toward government entities and the 1995 bombing of the U.S. Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Indeed, the debate swirling around citizen

participation is no longer ‘representative government vs. citizen participation’, but what type of citizen participation process is best (e.g., Konisky and Beierle 2001).

The arguments in favour of enhancing citizen participation frequently focus on the benefits of the process itself. Nelson and Wright (1995), for example, emphasise the participation process as a transformative tool for social change. In addition, citizen involvement is intended to produce better decisions and thus more efficiency benefits to the rest of society (Beierle 1999, Thomas 1995). Thus, as shown in Figure 1, we have two tiers of benefits to consider (process and outcomes) and two beneficiaries (government and citizens) in evaluating the effectiveness of the citizen participation process.

Figure 1: Advantages of Citizen Participation in Government Decision-Making

	Advantages to Citizen Participants	Advantages to Government
Decision Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Education (learn from and inform government representatives) * Persuade and enlighten government * Gain skills for activist citizenship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Education (learn from and inform citizens) * Persuade citizens; build trust and allay anxiety or hostility * Build strategic alliances * Gain legitimacy of decisions
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Break gridlock; achieve outcomes * Gain some control over policy process * Better policy and implementation decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Break gridlock; achieve outcomes * Avoid litigation costs * Better policy and implementation decisions

Education

An in-depth citizen participation process can aid in transcending the barriers to effective policy created by our sound-bite media culture. Informed and involved citizens become citizen-experts, understanding technically difficult situations and seeing holistic community-wide solutions. Pateman (1970), Sabatier (1988), and Blackburn and Bruce (1995) are examples of literature stressing the educational benefits of citizen participation. Administrators are able to explain their reasons for pursuing policies that at first glance by the public would not be popular. It is assumed that more participants with a more-sophisticated level of technical and social understanding will yield better policy decisions and thus better social and environmental

outcomes: ‘We envision that these relationships established with regional and community organizations will bring about a better understanding of environmental problems’ (EPA 1996, 1).

Administrators also benefit from receiving education on specific community groups’ positions. The administrators, through regular contact with citizens who might not otherwise be engaged in the policy process, learn what policies are likely to be explosively unpopular, and how to avoid such policy failures. A policy well-grounded in citizen preferences might be implemented in a smoother, less costly fashion because the public is more cooperative when the policy is implemented (Thomas 1995, Vroom and Jago 1988).

Political Suasion

What motivated government entities to abdicate part of their decision-making responsibilities to participatory groups may not have been a sincere desire to improve policy outcomes by becoming better educated about community preferences. Instead, the more powerful motivating factor might be the prospect of a more cooperative public. Thomas (1995, 113) explains, ‘More often than not, the impetus for public involvement comes from a need to obtain acceptance as a prerequisite to successful implementation’. Howard, Lipsky, and Marshall (1994) illustrate this in the historical context of urban politics, where federal and local policy established and ‘routinized’ citizen participation in response to the urban protest movement of the 1960s.

It is certainly an improvement in public affairs when government administrators incorporate ‘How might the public react?’ into everyday decision-making. However, some citizen participation programs may primarily serve a marketing purpose, where the participation process consists of government representatives guiding the citizens toward decisions that the administrator would have made in the first place. Rourke (1984, 54) provides an extreme example of a bureaucracy reluctant to concede control: ‘The truth of the matter is that agencies in the field of national security affairs give a good deal of lip service to the idea of consulting with the public, but in practice this consultation commonly consists of getting groups of citizens together so that they can be indoctrinated with the official point of view’. Whether the government truly collaborates with citizens, or whether it merely works to win over citizen sentiment, a key assumption in successful political suasion is the social influence of citizen participants. If they are influential (not necessarily elite) community members, their enthusiasm

for the policy will spread throughout the community, and opposition will be diffused (Howell, Olsen and Olsen 1987).

Empowerment

Political persuasion works in the opposite direction as well. Community activists can have regular contact with key government decision makers, and can persuasively convey their viewpoint in a non-confrontational atmosphere. Applegate (1998, 923) explains how citizen advisory boards allow an ‘opportunity to meet face to face with and personally persuade decision-makers’, and others advocate participation as a way to teach otherwise powerless citizens to interact with other groups in society, gaining legitimacy as political players (Fox 1996, Valadez 2001). Conversely, the history of urban citizen participation described by Howard, Lipsky, and Marshall (1994) suggests that making citizen participation in the 1970s and 1980s routine might have mollified an angry urban public to such an extent that pressure to reform was diffused.

Breaking Gridlock

In some communities, traditional political discourse can disintegrate into obstructionist manoeuvres, bringing decision-making to a halt. Weeks (2000) details a successful deliberative democracy project that forced recalcitrant city council members to implement painful budget cuts with the mandate of hundreds of citizens from workshops and survey responses. In cases such as this, a participatory initiative can vastly improve social outcomes, as balanced input from citizen participants can allow factions to compromise and find solutions to previously intractable problems (Reich 1990). Government agencies can obtain important political support to change directions: ‘By opening the process to meaningful public input, the department [of energy] is empowered to make decisions it could never make unilaterally’ (Applegate 1998, 931).

Avoiding Litigation Costs

Often, public participation is assumed to be cost-effective because it reduces the probability of litigation (Randolph and Bauer 1999). O’Leary et al. (1999, 139) note the expense of participatory processes, but explain: ‘Managers should expect stalled negotiations, breakdowns in trust, and outcomes into which not everyone will buy. Indeed, disgruntled stakeholders may

walk out of the process or still go to court over the outcome. But compare these possibilities to the higher potential of lengthy litigation delays should an organisation eschew meaningful stakeholder participation altogether’. However, Coglianese (1997) found that collaborative efforts in regulatory negotiations did not result in less litigation, and true litigation rates may have been exaggerated.

Environmental Management

Participatory structures such as citizen advisory boards were adopted in the 1980s and 1990s to improve upon the one-way flow of information in public hearings on proposed environmental policies. The ‘review and comment’ methodology – decide on the policy, then introduce it to the public in a public hearing – is a poor educational vehicle for complex topics, not to mention grossly inadequate as a persuasion tool, but is still used extensively (Beierle 1999). In some areas of the rural West, actions on the part of environmental regulators are met with hostility, since the government entity is regarded strictly as an outsider, unfamiliar with and unsympathetic to local economic conditions. Kenney (2000, 57) describes this hostility: ‘...[W]hy...is it nearly impossible to take a breath of western air or a drink of western water without hearing laments of federal paternalism, and without being aware of the stirrings of new “Sagebrush Rebellions”...?’ In this milieu, a small community can stage a media-friendly protest event and ignite sympathies nationwide. Such events provide grist for the political mill, and even national-level environmental protection funding can be jeopardized in response. Rourke (1984, 51-52) describes how intense media attention can derail an agency’s well-intended programs: ‘Any sudden expansion in the public that takes an interest in its activities may be a threat...for an executive agency... The agency may thus come under a critical scrutiny it had never experienced, and it may soon find itself under strong pressure to change the thrust of its decisions’. Citizen participation in environmental policy formation, therefore, is useful for informing regulators of exactly where volatile public backlash is likely to occur, and for winning the sympathies of a few influential citizens in places where opposition to environmental regulation is strongest.

Disadvantages of Citizen Participation

The following sections and Figure 2 describe certain problems of citizen participation processes that might be overcome by effective structuring, if resources permit. Other problems are contextual, suggesting that some communities are poor candidates for citizen participation initiatives, and measurable outcomes might be better achieved with other decision-making methods.

Figure 2: Disadvantages of Citizen Participation in Government Decision-Making

	Disadvantages to Citizen Participants	Disadvantages to Government
Decision Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Time consuming (even dull) * Pointless if decision is ignored 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Time consuming * Costly * May backfire, creating more hostility toward government
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Worse policy decision if heavily influenced by opposing interest groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Loss of decision-making control * Possibility of bad decision that is politically impossible to ignore * Less budget for implementation of actual projects

Cost

Many discussions of the value of public participation leave out a large barrier: cost. Although comparative costs have not been subject to close scrutiny, the low end of a ‘per-decision’ cost of a citizen participation group is arguably more expensive than the decision-making by a single agency administrator, even if the citizen participants’ time costs are ignored. A single administrator, technically trained and politically astute enough to recognise the probable consequences of his or her decision, may come to the same decision that the community group chose – and it may take him or her one month of work, one day, or even just one hour of consideration. Lawrence and Deagen (2001) note the heavy time-commitments citizen participation processes require, and Echeverria (2001) describes a collaborative process deliberately designed to slow down environmental decision-making to favour the status quo. Decisions happen slowly enough in government organizations (see Rourke 1984) without convening a public forum to first educate the public on the intricacies of the problem.

Particularly if litigation is unlikely, an elaborate public participation process may in fact pull resources away from the government agency's mission and reduce on-the-ground results.*

On the other hand, the costs described here are not adjusted for the social capital value that citizen participants gain by becoming involved, nor do they account for the probability of more effective policy implementation if citizen input leads to smarter solutions. When the political situation is volatile and top-down decision-making would be unpopular, if not unworkable, the upfront cost of citizen participation may well be worth the additional funding because the costs of a difficult implementation of policy might be avoided. Weeks (2000, 371) cautions, '...[A] community dialogue of the sort described here is neither cheap, fast, nor easy. Its application is limited to instances where the issue is critical, the political process is deadlocked, and there remains sufficient time to complete a yearlong public process'.

Difficulty of Diffusing Citizen Goodwill

Winning the hearts of the citizens by meeting with them regularly and ultimately gaining their trust and friendship may be the only way that regulators can promote new policies in communities where anti-government sentiment runs high. Ostrom (1990) suggests that collaborative decision-making works best when the group is small and homogenous, which is most likely found in rural communities. In larger communities, however, expecting ten or twenty citizen representatives to turn around popular opinion may be naïve. The citizen participants make up a tiny portion of the population, and unless he or she is known to represent a constituency, there are no guarantees that each citizen participant is influential in his or her community.

Complacency

Much has been written on the topic of public alienation from the public affairs process (e.g., Berman 1997), and the literature usually assumes that if only the right vehicle for empowerment and engagement is offered, citizens will lose their cynicism toward government and actively support democratic processes. However, theorists need to acknowledge that working out policy decisions and implementation details over a protracted series of meetings is an activity most

* Government funding of one component of the participatory effort (for example, the facilitator's salary) is sometimes leveraged with private funds from foundations. This results in a reduction of agency costs, but may not be sustainable, as foundations are traditionally reluctant to fund permanent operations.

citizens prefer to avoid. Where communities are complacent, there is a strong argument for top-down administration simply on the grounds of efficiency. Lawrence and Deagen (2001) allude to this in their study of public participation methods, suggesting that in cases where the public is likely to accept the mandate of an agency decision-maker, a participatory process is not necessary. Williams et al. (2001) show that although members of the public indicated *intent* to participate, very few (less than one percent in their study) followed up by phoning for more information to join a participatory process. Members of the public might prefer to pay taxes to hire an astute public administrator to do the decision-making, rather than personally allocate the time to get involved in the governing process.

Representation

Since citizen participants are not paid for their time, committees may be dominated by strongly partisan participants — whose livelihood or values are strongly affected by the decisions being made — or by those who live comfortably enough to allow them to participate regularly. Smith and McDonough (2001, 245) provide rather distressing evidence from their study of 53 focus groups that citizen participants recognized inequality in the representation and resented what they saw as an unfair public participatory process. Citizens were not at all satisfied with the process: ‘...[S]ome of the meetings I quit going to because they were loaded and they were orchestrated, so why attend when you knew the outcome was gonna be what they wanted...?’

Some participants, particularly those representing business and government agency interests, will be paid for their time devoted to the initiative. Curry (2001, 573-4) criticizes citizen participation processes for allowing special-interest views to dominate the decision-making: ‘A number of aspiring CP participant groups were clearly not acting in a representative capacity, or even perceiving themselves to be, and some had an openly declared intent to pursue vested interests...’. Interestingly, Curry describes the most common single-interest participants as those focused on the environment and resisting development, yet some opposition to citizen participation processes comes from the environmental field (McCloskey 1996). Kenney (2000) reports concern among environmentalists that collaborative processes commonly block participation from ‘known’ environmental activists, and that any remaining volunteer

participants sympathetic to environmental concerns are powerless against the well-compensated professionals representing the extractive industries.[◇]

Weber (2000, 240) illustrates how citizen participation committees are usually overpopulated with members of the top socioeconomic group. In Montana, grassroots environmental movements have ‘74%...college graduates and all have high school diplomas, compared to state-wide averages of 25.4% and 81%, respectively... [F]ully 42.6%...hold advanced degrees’ Weber also found that core members’ median income was higher than average, and core members are often full-time homemakers. The lack of low-income participants is shown in a developing world context by Russell and Vidler (2000), who found that citizen participants were difficult to engage because their main priorities were to provide for their families, not spend time in meetings. Thus, although many promote community participation as a way to ‘incorporate community values into decisions that might otherwise be dominated by a small elite’ (Kinsley 1997, 40), it appears that another, non-elected small elite can dominate a participatory process (Abel and Stephan 2000).

To solve the representation problem common in voluntary participation programs, some have proposed that citizen juries could serve as an alternative model of participation, where citizens are randomly selected from the population (Kathlene and Martin 1991). Crosby (1995), Dienel (1996), and Smith and Wales (2000) present theoretical and practical arguments in favour of an extensive jury system to promote participatory democracy. Petts (2001) found that although citizen juries were more representative, voluntary citizen participation panels were better than citizen juries at educating participants and arriving at more effective decisions. Moreover, the U.S. criminal justice jury system, with its preponderance of older, white, and higher-income jury members, is widely known to lack the representation that we seek (Domitrovich 1994, Bilecki, 1994). Finally, a jury or panel system, even if it achieves effective representation of population groups, will not likely include representatives of important special-interest groups.

Lack of Authority

In their article praising participatory environmental decision-making, Konisky and Beierle (2001, 823) nevertheless lament, ‘[T]hese processes [have] limited efficacy in changing policy, as

[◇] Interestingly, Amy (1983) warns of environmentalists in mediation processes being charmed and co-opted by opposing (usually business) interests, yet does not consider the possibility of the reverse.

most have only addressed issues outside the context of an actual policy decision'. Davis (1996) also warns about the costs of exaggerated expectations on the part of the citizen participants. If citizen participants are misled into thinking that their decisions will be implemented, then the decisions are ignored or merely taken under advisement, resentment will develop over time. King (1998, 57) notes the demoralising effect of such pre-determined decision-making: 'In retrospect, it was fairly clear that the administrator had decided to cut the program before the [participatory] evaluation ever began and that we were merely going through bureaucratic motions to justify that decision'. Lack of representation and authority to make decisions (sometimes described as 'voice') appear to be key reasons for participatory processes backfiring and actually increasing public dissatisfaction (e.g., Smith and McDonough 2001, Julian et al. 1997).

The Power of Wrong Decisions

Conversely, some environmental advocates warn that collaborative environmental planning councils, with inadequate representation of environmental interests, will produce authoritative decisions that are unduly influenced by local economic interests (Echeverria 2001). Britell (1997, 7) asks, 'Where will the path that replaces effective administration and oversight of our laws with schmoozy consensus groups and phony partnerships eventually lead us?' Because these decisions were made by a citizen committee, government representatives – including environmental regulatory agencies – may find it politically impossible to defy the decisions. Although the mandate of a citizen group can be a powerful tool to break political gridlock, the mandate is feared for its potential to ratify selfish decisions that favour the most powerful or persuasive members of the collaborative group, rather than the wider public (Kenney 2000).

Persistent Selfishness

Implicit in some of the citizen participation literature is that participatory decision-making will automatically lead to more altruistic concern for others. Others, however, see locally-based decision-making as an expanded opportunity to influence policy for personal gain. Economists are widely chastised (Barber 1984, deLeon and Denhardt 2000) for their Hobbesian assumption of 'economic man' as a selfish creature (Levy 1995). Repugnant as economic man appears to some theorists, it would be short-sighted to ignore the persistence of self-interest. That is, friendship and persuasion may still provide no match for personal or financial incentives.

Participatory Watershed Planning in a Difficult Setting

Omaha seemed to have all the environmental elements suggesting potential gains from a multi-jurisdictional, participatory watershed management process. The Papillion (known regionally as the 'Papio') Creek system, originating in farmland north and west of Omaha, gathers pollutants from agriculture and urban runoff before it joins with the Missouri River southeast of the city. The watershed covers three counties with a combined population of 605,000. Because of extensive flooding in the past and land-use pressures, Papillion Creek is straightened and channelised in many areas. What remains is a creek system whose channels are expensive to maintain, but do prevent most flooding. The costs of this solution include not only the maintenance, but also poor water quality, degraded aquatic and streamside habitat, and the aesthetic drawback of a barren, grassy ditch running through the city. Upstream rural citizens have a history of voting down projects that could benefit urban Omaha, and prior proposals to build dams for Omaha flood control had been defeated. Development had accelerated in the 1990s virtually without restrictions, as many homes and businesses were routinely built near the creek in areas that would have flooded years before.

The authors of this article received a grant from the Environmental Protection Agency to incorporate multi-criteria decision-making methodology (Keeney and Raiffa 1976, Stansbury et al. 1991, Farrell, 1999) into a participatory process with area stakeholders. The stakeholders were to test this new decision-making methodology as they considered new management alternatives for the Papillion Creek watershed. The researchers met with representatives of a wide range of municipal, county, and environmental planning and regulatory agencies. These managers were enthusiastic about the project and hopeful that collaborative efforts and a new vision for the Papillion would ultimately lead to improvements in the Creek's water quality. Several managers and environmental interest group representatives also expressed support for the neutrality of the effort; that is, the university researchers facilitating the project were considered a neutral and dependable source for information.

Creek management alternatives for the participatory group to evaluate included:

- (1) 'Environmental' alternative: improve habitats, reduce flood flows, install buffer strips.

- (2) ‘Development’ alternative: foster real estate and agricultural development, further channelise⁺ streams to provide flood control.
- (3) ‘Recreational’ alternative: install reservoirs, parks, and trails.
- (4) ‘Flood Protection’ alternative: install several flood-control dams, make structural channel improvements.

Making the decisions together with area citizens was hoped to have several beneficial effects. For example, residents of Omaha might envision a more nature-stream system in their community, rather than considering the creek a ‘flood ditch’, as it has been for several generations. Urban and rural residents might become more aware of water pollution sources such as the harmful effects of residential and agricultural pesticide run-off into the creek. Agencies might engender ground-level support for controversial future land-use controls, including allowing some streamside land to flood and requiring buffer zones between developed land and the creek.

Heroic efforts were applied to convene a participatory working group including not only the agency representatives, but also members of the rural and urban public, recreational users of the Creek, and developers. Articles in local newspapers, brochures distributed around the region (malls, trails, neighbourhood groups, sporting goods stores, etc.), direct contact with landowners, phone calls to early respondents of the brochures, and free pizza at conveniently scheduled meetings were all used in an unsuccessful effort to attract interested stakeholders to public meetings

The researchers did gather data on the potential for using multi-criteria decision-making methods; however, the data were from a participant group primarily composed of conscientious agency representatives rather than a diverse group of stakeholders. For the main forum convened for the purpose of evaluating the multi-criteria decision-making methods, mailings and phone calls to a list of respondents resulted in fifteen citizen representatives (landowners, recreational users of the creek, etc.) who promised to attend the forum. However, only one citizen representative showed up for the forum. The researchers as well as the agency representatives felt that the public participatory element of the study was a disappointment, and declined to hold subsequent forums (although additional and likewise unsuccessful attempts

⁺ Channelisation entails removal of all streamside trees, other vegetation (except grass), and obstructions to water flow such as rocks and fallen trees.

were made to convene a working group of development industry representatives). Other elements of the study – such as gathering data and mapping potential environmental effects from various management alternatives and gathering agency representatives from a variety of jurisdictions and agencies – were considered successful. The lack of citizen participation in the Papillion Creek project is likely due to the following:

- The project failed to spark widespread public interest due to lack of definition of a problem. Residents had long been accustomed to a channelised creek system, and might have been unable to envision alternatives. Efforts by the researchers to avoid ‘promoting’ a more environmentally attractive alternative (letting the stakeholders themselves choose their preferred alternative) meant that no alternative vision was available to the public early on as a possible incentive to participate. Thus, there was no sense of crisis and no organized push among local residents for a more aesthetically and environmentally beneficial watershed.
- The project acknowledged from the start that the stakeholders’ decision would be advisory, implying that the stakeholder group would have no authority in actual decision-making. The study was intended to test-drive a new decision-making methodology in a participatory process. The public might have been better motivated to participate if the project was clearly part of the decision-making process. Results of Smith and McDonough (2001) suggest that even if the Omaha project had succeeded in attracting citizen participants to meetings, a lack of voice in actual government decision-making might have had a politically harmful effect for the participating agencies.
- The project failed to generate involvement from representatives of the real estate development industry, which was widely regarded to have considerable political influence in local environmental regulation. Bingham (1986) and others cite this as a key flaw, rendering untenable decisions. The authors believe that the Omaha development industry sees little need for public participation because the current regulatory structure is quite unrestrictive. Agency representatives on the panel felt that the development viewpoint would be very different from the rest of the public,

and any participatory effort lacking participation from the development industry was likely to be unrealistically rosy.

- Widespread public complacency proved to be a problem for the study.

Residents of the area were generally satisfied with government agencies in the area, and rarely showed the hostility sometimes seen in rural Western communities. There was also no strong pro-environmental or property rights activism regarding Papillion Creek; rather, the environment was not an issue many people felt strongly about.

The complacency toward environmental issues could be more generally indicative of a local culture that is uninterested in getting involved in public affairs. Judging from previous efforts, this problem may be quite common. Flynn (1998, 203) describes an Irish ‘political culture unused to the very idea of participation’. Huitema (1998, 223) summarises: ‘[I]t is hard to motivate [Canadian] citizens to become involved in a highly participatory process’, and in Italy, ‘the willingness to positively interact is normally very disputable’ (Balducci and Fareri 1998, 165).

Thus, the Papillion Creek case presents a particular challenge for implementing a participatory process. Omaha appears to require a crisis or at least a defined policy issue to motivate participants, as well as a decision-making structure that grants authority to citizens. Even with those elements, however, the local climate of passive acceptance of representative governance might still have complicated any participatory effort.

Ideal Conditions for Citizen Participation

Innes et al. (1994), Margerum (2002), Beierle (1999), and Howell, Olsen, and Olsen (1987) provide a comprehensive array of strategies to employ in constructing effective participatory practices in environmental management. Commonly cited strategies are careful selection of a representative group of stakeholders; a transparent decision-making process to build trust among the participants; clear authority in decision-making; competent and unbiased group facilitators; regular meetings; and adequate financial resources to support the group process through the potentially long learning and decision-making process.

However, even if the above strategies are employed, the success of the initiative in achieving significant outcomes (more-effective community decision-making and a public that accepts the new policy as the most effective choice) may depend strongly on the locale. Concrete ways to determine whether collaborative or participatory decision-making may work are provided with typologies using environmental (Yoder 1999) and stakeholder descriptions (Beierle 1999 and Thomas 1995). Yet none of these typologies provide a unifying decision structure that is germane for the administrator with limited resources. Given a finite budget and a set of policy outcomes to produce, what issues are critically in need of stakeholder involvement prior to (and even during) implementation? What decisions, on the other hand, would be unusually laborious to accomplish in a participatory format? Following are several considerations that may be described as ideal conditions for implementation of enhanced citizen participation in agency decision-making:

Low-Cost Indicators

- Citizens readily volunteer for projects that benefit the entire community.
- Key stakeholders are not too geographically dispersed. Participants can easily reach meetings.
- Citizens have enough income to attend meetings without harming their ability to provide for their families.
- The community is homogenous, so the group requires fewer representatives of interest groups. Smaller groups speed decision-making.
- The topic does not require representatives to master complex technical information quickly.

High-Benefit Indicators

- The issue is gridlocked and a citizen mandate is needed to break the gridlock.
- Hostility toward government entities is high, and the agency seeks validation from community members to successfully implement policy.
- Community representatives with particularly strong influence in the community are willing to serve as representatives.
- The group facilitator has credibility with all representatives.
- The issue is of high interest to stakeholders, and may even be considered at 'crisis stage' if actions are not changed.

Non-Ideal Conditions for Citizen Participation

Conversely, the citizen participation process may be ineffective and wasteful, compared to traditional top-down decision making, under the conditions below. Note that any one of the indicators below is not a conclusive reason to avoid a participatory process. Rather, if a community fits the following indicators overall more than it fits the above indicators, the administrator might be better advised to use agency revenues for a more streamlined decision-making process, devoting the remainder of the resources for program implementation.

High-Cost Indicators

- An acquiescent public is reluctant to get involved in what is considered the job of government employees.
- The region is geographically large, or presents other obstacles (such as heavy traffic) that make regular face-to-face meetings difficult.
- Many competing factions and socioeconomic groups require a very large participatory group.
- Low-income residents are key stakeholders for the issue at hand, and should be included, yet cannot because of work and family priorities.
- Complex technical knowledge is required before participants can make decisions.
- The issue under consideration is not recognized by the public as a problem, nor are potential competing policy alternatives familiar to the public.

Low-Benefit Indicators

- The public is generally not hostile toward government entities.
- The agency has had prior success in implementing policy without citizen participation (i.e. the voting process is sufficient in guiding policy-making behaviour).
- The population is large, making it difficult for involved stakeholders to influence a significant portion of the population.
- The decisions of the group are likely to be ignored, no matter how much effort went into their formation (the group does not have authority to make policy decisions).
- The decisions of the group are likely to be the same decisions produced by the government entity.

Conclusion

This article, while describing the very important benefits of citizen participation, also provides a litmus test for agencies to consider when they allocate resources toward citizen participation processes. Do citizens care enough to participate actively in policy-making, or would resources devoted toward participatory processes be better directed toward implementation? Does local citizen participation imply more opportunity for economically motivated special interests to dominate the decision process? Criticism lobbed at participatory efforts in environmental management may soon be heard in other sectors, as decreasing government budgets require intense scrutiny of government performance outcomes.

Delegating environmental decision-making authority to citizens is a policy strategy lauded for its holistic consideration of local economic interests, yet criticised by the environmental left for its potential to roll back decades of environmental regulatory success. Evidence for the effectiveness of community participation in environmental management is in short supply, due in part to the inherent problems in measuring the success of environmental policies that may take decades to positively affect the environment. Even more difficult, perhaps, is the prospect of measuring incremental changes in the well-being of the general public as they become more engaged in the policy process.

Concern exists among environmentalists that locally-based citizen participation processes will lead to a relaxation of previously successful environmental regulation. Another concern, rarely voiced, is the potential wastefulness of the process if employed in a non-ideal community. Even if the citizen participation process does not lead to relaxed environmental regulation, it may entail a significant expenditure of resources that could be used elsewhere to achieve better on-the-ground results. With widespread public benefit as the goal of any public policy process, it behoves the administrator to consider the advantages and disadvantages of the decision-making process when determining the most effective implementation strategy, bearing in mind that talk is not cheap – and may not even be effective.

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