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Public Sector Reports

Michigan COMMENTARY

The Role of Public Involvement in Accomplishing Community Change

by David Gruber, Senior Consultant for Public Affairs

In the process of way-finding, the strategic link is the environmental image, the generalized mental picture of the exterior physical world that is held by an individual. This image is the product both of immediate sensation and of the memory of past experience, and it is used to interpret information and to guide action. The need to recognize and pattern our surroundings is so crucial, and has such long roots in the past, that this image has wide practical and emotional importance to the individual.

Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*

. . . lawns, landscaping, variety of housing styles, special recreational facilities, absence of mixed land uses, corner shops, even religious buildings, are all ways of establishing and maintaining a particular image, that is, of communicating social meanings and identity, the maintenance of which is seen as the role of planning.

Amos Rapoport, *The Meaning of the Built Environment*

We shall have something solid to chew on if we think of city neighborhoods as mundane organs of self-government. Our failures with city neighborhoods are, ultimately, failures in localized self-government. And our successes are successes in localized self-government.

Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

THE IMAGE OF THE GOOD LIFE

Since Moses viewed the Promised Land, and surely before, humans have sought to build for themselves an ideal community that reflects their best qualities and instills those qualities in their children. The image of the ideal takes many forms, and in the minds of their inhabitants many real communities reach an acceptable approximation of the ideal. Sociologists, urban planners, developers, government officials, engineers, and others have discovered in recent years that people hold tenaciously to these perceptions, resisting any change in their communities that threatens to alter the ideal or the reality that resembles it. Agents of change include population shifts, economic forces, health conditions, land use categorization and zoning, and such specific building projects as stadiums, shopping malls, landfills, and halfway houses. The challenge is to accomplish change—which in the modern age is inevitable—in a way that minimizes conflict between the public and the leading brokers of change—business and government. The solution is threefold: public involvement, risk assessment (the process by which people, in light of their own values and preferences, weigh the risks associated with civic action), and community planning.

WORKING WITH THE PUBLIC

Popular culture and the press have heavily influenced our twentieth century notions of the ideal community. They have favored, by and large, the image of the American farm or small town over the image of the city. In movies, books, and television shows from *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* to Charles Kuralt's "On the Road" segment on the CBS news, the small town is portrayed as a peaceful place where neighbors are friendly, trustworthy, and perhaps even a little eccentric; children are wholesome; and a sense of community prevails. The city, by contrast, is portrayed as driven by power, greed, and gunfire, and the denizen's basic

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instinct is survival. To be sure, the media also have presented the flip side of each image: the small town's insularity, the big city's vibrancy and sophistication. Nevertheless, the image of the small town and the virtues associated with it are cherished in the American heart, and it lives on in the minds of many homeowners in the suburbs and the more placid of our city neighborhoods—the small town's urban approximations. As a community planner recently said of the upscale suburb for which he works, "It hasn't been rural in thirty years, but people still think of it that way."

The image of the ideal community becomes all the more entrenched when people buy a house, raise a family, pursue a career, plan a future—all with the ideal consciously or unconsciously in mind. Stability is desired. Change is disruptive and therefore to be forestalled.

Change need not destabilize, however, and if the public is involved in assessing the risks of change and planning the future, disruption can be minimized. For such assessment and planning to work, participants in the process must

- be aware of the relationship between themselves and their environments, both natural and "built" (discussed below),
- have the capacity to understand the scientific and economic information necessary to assess risk,
- understand their personal and community values,
- be able to evaluate scientific and economic data in light of those values, and
- be able to develop policy options to resolve problems.

There are some indications that Americans may not be ready for such an exercise. Science and math scores of U.S. students are low compared to those of students in other developed countries. Although these scores customarily are used as a predictor of the country's ability to compete in a global marketplace, they also have implications for the ability of U.S. citizens to cope with their day-to-day life. Concerns also have been raised about citizen decision-making skills. According to a recent article in *The Detroit News*, educators and psychologists worry that "people often are uninterested in applying reason, weighing alternatives, and suppressing their biases." They rush into decisions without gathering information or considering consequences. This is as true for such personal decisions as marriage or having children as it is for corporate and government decisions affecting the lives of thousands, the experts said.

But studies also show that with proper assistance people perform quite well in evaluating scientific issues. A 1989 study at Carnegie Mellon University, for example, asked lay opinion leaders to develop a power line route that would minimize the purported health effects of electric and magnetic fields. The study concludes that such citizens, when well motivated and well informed, "should be capable of sophisticated, high-quality decision-making on a variety of difficult semitechnical policy decision tasks in risk management." A 1991 study conducted by the Public Agenda Foundation finds that lay citizens, when educated about the issues of global warming and solid waste management, develop solutions remarkably similar to those recommended by scientists. Further evidence of citizen capability comes from certain government-initiated projects discussed below that are successfully involving the public in solutions to environmental problems.

As the need and demand for citizen involvement increase, so will the need for educational support in the communities in which such processes are taking place. Programs for children and adults in understanding community risk assessment, offered through schools, adult education programs, service clubs, community organizations, and in other ways, can enhance the ability of people to shape their surroundings in accordance with their values and goals.

An essential component of the community risk assessment process is participation by a broad range of community representatives, including those with technical and economic expertise. Bringing all pertinent

viewpoints together makes it possible to overcome differences between them, essential for clear two-way communication.

The first task is to bridge the gap between experts—scientists, financial analysts, planners, and the like—and lay people. Experts and nonexperts approach problems from different perspectives, as outlined by Charles Piller in his 1991 book, *The Fail-Safe Society: Community Defiance and the End of American Technological Optimism*. Experts place their trust in scientific methods and evidence, while nonexperts place theirs in democratic explanations and evidentiary processes having broad participation and openness. Experts appeal to authority and expertise, nonexperts to common sense, peers, tradition, and folk wisdom. Experts see risk as depersonalized probabilities, nonexperts relate it to themselves, their families, and their community. Experts are concerned only about risks that can be specified and measured, nonexperts are concerned as well about unknown or unanticipated risks. Experts and nonexperts must learn to talk and listen to each other: The different perspectives and approaches each have worth and can be used to reach decisions acceptable to all.

The second task is to overcome distrust and establish a workable process. This can be accomplished through a number of steps, as suggested by Daniel Yankelovich in his 1990 book, *Coming to Public Judgment,* and by the National Research Council in its 1989 book, *Improving Risk Communication.*

- Establish a policy of openness.
- Guarantee that citizen views will be heard and considered.
- Address pet preoccupations first. Yankelovich and broadcaster David Brinkley both ascribe to this advice. Yankelovich notes that in discussing public issues, many people won't listen to other views until they speak their piece. Brinkley once said that he often starts an interview by asking an open question about his guest's views on the issue at hand. That allows the guest to get her/his agenda out, clearing the way for more incisive inquiries.
- Prioritize issues and, to avoid confusion and distraction, tackle only two or three at a time. Involve citizens as well as experts in analyzing risk and policy options.
- Emphasize the values inherent in the choices presented. Technical issues tend to be discussed in technical terms, so society relies heavily on expert solutions to today's problems. Relating technical issues to the concerns of everyday life, in everyday language, acknowledges the values that underlie the relationships between clients and their surroundings.
- Where important values conflict, work to retain elements of each. In other words, compromise.
- Allow adequate time to resolve issues. It may take days or years to reach resolution on a given issue. Many issues are complex and require careful analysis and discussion. Time allows all factors to be addressed and allows participants to adjust to new circumstances.

The third task is to develop policy options. This can be done by first establishing mutual goals, which is important to the task at hand and also develops initial agreement among participants. What kind of community do they want to live in? What are its values, and how do social, economic, and technical trends support those values? Next, determine the starting point, i.e., what is the community like now? Then determine the actions necessary to get to the goal from the starting point. Here a variety of choices come into play—the ideal and the possible meet. Each option for action will have benefits and costs; each may reduce current risks or present new ones. Participants will evaluate data in light of community values and recommend a policy that best corresponds to their aspirations. If the image of the ideal community must change in light of the facts and circumstances, community residents will be better able to change with it if they have been involved in developing the policy to accommodate the change.

UNCLE SAM WANTS YOU

Support for—and demonstration of the worth of—public involvement in risk assessment and community planning are coming from an unlikely source: the federal government. In recent years Uncle Sam has been asking citizens for their help in improving the environment. The government is learning that with public input it can better prioritize environmental problems and more effectively direct limited funding. To further these objectives, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) comparative risk analysis project was born. State by state, citizens are being asked to work with scientists and government officials to develop consensus on environmental needs. In 1992 Public Sector Consultants directed Michigan's relative risk assessment project.

The government also is finding that through public involvement, citizens gain a measure of control over environmental risk, which reduces anxiety about complex technologies that citizens may not fully understand. For example, the federal Community Right-to-Know Act of 1986 requires citizen participation in developing emergency response plans for local accidents involving hazardous substances and that residents be involved in monitoring hazardous chemicals stored at local business and industrial sites.

Public involvement also enables citizens to help bring damaged resources back to health. This valuable source of assistance has been recognized by the governments of the United States and Canada, which have called on citizens to assist in developing plans to improve water quality in several "areas of concern" around the Great Lakes.

The EPA comparative risk analysis project, the right-to-know activities, and the Great Lakes water quality improvement programs recognize that (1) in assessing environmental risk, science, economics, and social values cannot be separated; (2) the public is much more accepting of decisions made with citizen input; (3) people are sensitive to and have strong feelings about the environment; and (4) public participation in mending local environmental damage promotes community social and political health.

The government activities described above deal with threats to air, land, and water resources—the *natural environment*. But the communities in which most people live are to a large degree human creations; they constitute the *built environment*, as planners and architects call it. The built environment is no less a candidate for public involvement, risk assessment, and planning than is the natural environment.

A process addressing the built environment already exists, of course. Communities across the nation engage in comprehensive planning—the drafting and updating of master plans for community design and the use of community resources. Comprehensive planning involves exhaustive surveys of population and economic trends, study of detailed maps of physical resources, and considerations of alternative development strategies. The end result is, it is to be hoped, a livable community and, as Lynch and Rapoport suggest in the quotations at the beginning of this commentary, an image that reflects the characteristics of the community and its inhabitants to the world and to the inhabitants themselves.

Missing from comprehensive planning in many cases, however, is public involvement in assessing the risks and values posed by alternative development patterns. Opting for growth, for example, may raise the demand for electricity and the need for solid waste disposal. Where, then, to put the power lines, which may be unhealthy and definitely are unsightly? Where to put the landfill, which some residents fear will leak and contaminate the water supply? Opting for slow growth may raise different issues, chief among them the question of who shall be allowed to join a community whose desirable features are so carefully guarded? Without development of a value-based consensus among residents, local government, and local business, people's image of their ideal community will be constantly under assault from threats ignored or un-anticipated, with no way to resolve the problems. Worse, a darker side of the human communal character may prevail, one than tends toward possessiveness, exclusivity, and intolerance.

Ongoing public involvement through a broad representation of interests is imperative in comprehensive planning for two reasons. First, it can provide a balance of interests where local elections fail to do so.

Residents who disagree with the decisions of the local administration may challenge them, sometimes in court. Challengers sometimes contend that the decisions do not reflect the will of the people, that they should have been based on more or different information, or that the change they bring will be detrimental. An advisory panel of community representatives can reduce such concerns by collecting all pertinent information and analyzing it from multiple perspectives. The group's ongoing input can serve local officials as an invaluable gauge of public response to social, economic, and environmental challenges and the means to meet them constructively.

Second, in broader political terms, public involvement in such an approach has the potential to place individual interests at the service of community interests. The process elevates personal concerns about community health, safety, and values to the public arena. It asks that all residents with a stake in the community enter that arena to give the community direction and shape. The community in essence creates and re-creates itself—as it should in a democracy, and a major ideal is attained: The process, however mundane in Jane Jacobs's terms, passes to future generations a lesson in and model of effective self-government and a community to sustain it.

David Gruber joined Public Sector Consultants in January and is a member of the Public Affairs Department, which specializes in public involvement programming for business, government, and nonprofit organizations and in conference planning and media relations. Mr. Gruber, an attorney and former journalist, has a master's degree in communication from the University of Michigan and a J.D. degree from Wayne State University Law School.

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