Coping with Growth
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Citizen Involvement Strategies in community growth issues

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Involvement
Most people hold the belief that participatory democracy is a fair and just method of arriving at public decisions that affect their lives. Let us reflect for a moment upon the citizen's role in this process.

Involvement requires that a person be present and active in the decision-making process. There is a high degree of listening, debating, sharing, commitment, and conflict. Involved citizens take risks; they have a stake in the decision-making process, and the outcome of their involvement will determine the degree to which they are to be punished or rewarded for taking an active part.

When we speak of citizen input in this publication, we are referring to those who are involved in the decision-making process—not those simply participating through elected or designated representatives, nor acting as sympathetic observers without committing much in the way of time, money, or prestige.

Why is citizen involvement important?
The goal of any attempt to involve local citizens should be to achieve a better decision for the community—one which will have support and commitment over time. Meaningful involvement can also bring about public decisions more responsive to local needs, the initiation of community improvements, and a sense of pride and making a difference in one's own community.

From the citizen's viewpoint, there are several reasons why meaningful involvement is desirable. Lack of faith and trust in public officials has prompted many citizens to take a more active role in influencing public decisions. Rapid growth in the number of special interest groups desiring access to the decision-making process has also increased the demand for more meaningful involvement. Coalitions of special interests are becoming much more common, as people discover they have been locked out of certain decisions or have lost an end product that was desired. This creates a stronger awareness of the positive aspects of presenting a united vocal front to achieve common purposes.

But basically, as problems and the decisions to resolve them become more complex, it is often a person's desire to feel that some control is retained. Understanding of the forces that affect the citizen and his community has increased recognition of the need for methods of more meaningful involvement.

The Issue Cycle

1. People become disturbed by some condition in the community. Concerns begin to surface as community dissatisfaction rises. In an area, social issues may be caused by the inadequate provision of public services, overcrowded schools, inadequate housing, pollution, and other forms of government inaction.

2. The concern leads to community discussions, which result in the definition of a problem to be resolved. At this stage, citizens gather on issues that are not active involvement. The most common criticisms leveled at citizen involvement as it is currently practiced are:

- Too little control by the public;
- Organized groups carry more influence than those groups or individuals not well organized;
- The current process for involvement is too formal;
- Citizens, not agencies needing the input, must initiate any acts of involvement;
- Meetings are too long (i.e., those affected by decisions being made) who should be contacted and encouraged to get involved are not;
- Involvement is voluntary after the fact, (i.e., an agency makes a decision that it wants to sell to); and
- The benefit of involvement is seldom identified;
- Involvement often results in a more complicated and lengthy process.

If some or all of the above complaints are true, what can public officials do to make involvement more meaningful for those concerned or affected by public decisions?

Public Officials' Role

A key question: When and where should officials and citizens enter into public decision-making?

The traditional response has been to "involve" citizens in public issues at the beginning of the decision-making process. The assumption is that citizens generally deal with several public policy issues simultaneously. Each individual must make a decision for himself or herself about the priorities of his or her life. If the issues are related, then the impacts and their distribution are of even greater concern—because goals established for one group of people can negatively impact the community and others. Add to this the fact that group goals may compete for too little information, have long-term effects on people's lives, and create community conflict; hence, it becomes critical that officials and citizens in community issues at the proper point and in the proper manner.

An economist at the University of Arizona has identified a process that characterizes how communities deal with the impacts of public decision-making. It is called the "Issue Cycle." Recognizing this cycle can help officials to ensure that citizens have more constructive and timely input into public decision-making.

7. A public decision regarding a course of action is made. This may or may not agree with priority selections identified by involved citizens.

8. The actions are implemented. At this point, still a different type of management problem may be encountered.

The Skills That Make Meaningful Involvement

Skills that make meaningful involvement of citizens can be grouped into four categories:

1. Effective communication with the public;
2. Efficient use of resources;
3. Effective allocation of resources;
4. Effective management of relationships.

Effective communication with the public involves ensuring that citizens are adequately informed about proposals, and that they are given an opportunity to express their opinions. Efficient use of resources involves ensuring that the most effective use is made of limited resources. Effective allocation of resources involves ensuring that resources are distributed in a way that maximizes their effectiveness. Effective management of relationships involves ensuring that relationships between citizens and public officials are positive and productive.

These skills are necessary for public officials to effectively involve citizens in the decision-making process. Citizens must be satisfied that the results of their involvement are meaningful, otherwise their participation may be viewed as a waste of time and effort.
b. Reduce the risks of involvement. This can be accomplished in many ways. Meeting citizens in surroundings familiar to them and in a physical setting conducive to open discussion will help. People are more comfortable and willing to talk in surroundings they know. Speaking in front of large groups, which often necessitates the use of a microphone, should be avoided. If a meeting is larger than twenty people, break down into small discussion groups to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to be heard.

Risk can be further reduced by setting informal ground rules. Parliamentary procedure often makes the framework for discussion too formal and solution-oriented. Informal guidelines—such as limiting individual speaking time to a few minutes and reminding people not to speak when the subject at hand—are often much more effective. Citizens will also perceive less risk in becoming involved if they are well informed. Publicize meeting agendas well in advance, and disseminate policy-related information through mailings, mass media, and outside resource experts prior to actual calls for citizen input. This will help produce open, policy-related discussion.

c. Develop listening skills. Good listening—by both public officials and involved citizens—can reduce unnecessary conflict among competing interests and show the public that their input is having an impact. Use a newspaper print pad to record key comments and acknowledge that you understand the points being made. Putting key ideas in writing before the group reinforces their perception that citizen input is being heard, and will be considered when a course of action is chosen. A good ground rule to use is the reflecting technique, whereby a person cannot make his point until he has clearly stated the last person’s comments in his own words. This will ensure that misunderstandings are kept to a minimum.

Finally, officials in charge of public involvement functions should refrain from making judgmental statements about a person’s comments. A person’s opinions are based on values and beliefs. Being told that those values are wrong will only discourage future participation and defeat the intended purpose of seeking involvement: that is, to gather citizen input that will lead to better public policy decisions.

Conclusion
Democratic processes mandate that citizens have the opportunity to make input into the public decision-making process. Their involvement can only be meaningful if both they and public officials understand why their input is important. Answering this “why” can be made easier if appropriate forms and functions of involvement are used, along with knowledge of the group and personal communication skills that facilitate citizen involvement in the public decision-making process.

References
Heberlein, Thomas A., Principles of Public Involvement, Staff Paper In Rural and Community Development, University of Wisconsin Extension, April 1976.

This publication is part of the “Coping with Growth” series produced by the Western Rural Development Center. Other titles in the series include:
- Evaluating Fiscal Impact Studies: Community Guidelines
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