Public Participation Helps Communities and Residents

Getting Citizens Involved

by Mark Kemp-Rye
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Millions of fans helped make *Runaway Bride* one of the top films of 1999, a success that came as no big surprise. The movie’s stars, Julia Roberts and Richard Gere, are, after all, two of the biggest names in Hollywood. But the unsung star of the show—whose appearance even the most devoted Roberts or Gere fan couldn’t help but notice—was the setting: the fictitious town of Hale.

In reality, Hale is Berlin, Maryland, population 3,000. The town’s tree-lined streets and restored 19th century architecture provided the perfect backdrop for *Runaway Bride*’s tale of a small town girl who repeatedly flees her own weddings at the last possible moment.

But, the picture perfect town of Berlin wasn’t always so picture perfect. By the 1980s, the downtown area had fallen on hard times. Storefronts were boarded up and the town had a deserted feel to it. Many thought it was just a matter of time before the town died completely. Fortunately, through citizen involvement and public participation in the issues that confronted the town (not to mention plenty of hard work), Berlin transformed itself.

“The revitalization of Berlin is a wonderful example of what can be done when citizens work together for the success of their community,” says Mayor Rex Hailey. “The renovation of the town center and the historic preservation of the commercial and residential districts are a result of the cooperative efforts of local citizens, businesses, and the town government.”

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Jean Holloway, training manager, Environmental Finance Center, University of Maryland

Why involve citizens?

Public participation is predicated on the notion that not only do public bodies, such as local governments and utilities, have a responsibility to inform their citizens about public projects, but that they also benefit from the ideas that residents generate. “Public involvement is a mutual education process,” says Alexis Milea of the California Department of Health Services. “The public learns about what’s involved in putting a program together. The bureaucrats learn what the real issues are at the grassroots level.”

According to Mohamad Alkadry, assistant professor of public administration and the instructor of an innovative course in public participation at West Virginia University, there are five reasons for involving citizens in community matters. He maintains that participation:

1. yields increased trust and confidence in government;
2. increases the possibility that people will accept decisions and abide by them;
3. provides people with a voice in design and decision-making.
For those working in the drinking water industry, the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) Amendments of 1996 requires public involvement when developing state and tribal source water assessment plans; that state and tribal plans and assessment results be made available to the public; and that public water systems provide customers with an annual water quality or consumer confidence report (CCR). (For more information about source water assessment plans, see the Spring 1998 issue of On Tap. For more information about CCRs, see the Summer 1999 On Tap.)

In the report Strategies for Effective Public Involvement: Drinking Water Source Assessment and Protection, the League of Women Voters Education Fund states, “Ideally, public involvement brings people with different needs and values together to develop a plan for ‘the common good’ through respectful dialog. The shift from ‘command and control’ regulation to a more cooperative and inclusive public interaction [in the 1996 SDWA Amendments] may pose some initial hurdles. Everyone involved may need to discard some comfortable patterns and expectations.”

A number of communities have chosen to adopt the SDWA mandates by only meeting the bare minimums for public notifications. Other communities, however, are encouraging citizen input in a variety of ways, ranging from public forums to environmental advisory boards. (See the articles “Local Government Environmental Advisory Boards” on page 37 and “New England Town Meetings” on page 20 of this issue.)

“It is essential for communities to become aware of and involved in the issues that have long-term impact on their health and well-being,” says Douglas Sarno, executive director, International Association for Public Participation. “Community members themselves are in the best position to help decision makers understand the unique character of their community and to ensure that community interests are served. In-depth community knowledge of its own infrastructure is the best hope for the inter-generational stewardship that all communities need.”

Public Participation in Action

“For public participation is the exact methodology we [Indian Health Service] developed in working with Native American communities on solid waste issues,” says Rod Coker, tribal utility consultant (retired) with the Indian Health Service (IHS). “We have used it quite effectively at several reservations in EPA Region 8. We [IHS] typically come into a community, meet with the tribal council and/or tribal utility organization to gather information, then return to our office and draft a solid waste management plan for that reservation.”

Will this technique work for water and wastewater projects? “While we would involve the community in water or wastewater projects, we have found that solid waste programs require a much higher level of community participation,” says Coker. “But there’s no reason making in order to improve plans, decisions, and service delivery:
4. promotes a sense of community by bringing people with common goals together; and
5. heightens public awareness of problems.

These reasons are so compelling to many communities that they are trying to incorporate public participation in any number of areas.

At the national level, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has taken a firm stance in support of the principles of citizen involvement. “In all its programs, EPA must provide for the most extensive public participation possible in decision making,” says Carol Browner, former EPA administrator, in the report Engaging the American People: A Review of EPA’s Public Participation Policy and Regulations with Recommendations for Action.

“This requires that we remain open to all points of view and take affirmative steps to solicit input from those who will be affected by decisions. Our willingness to remain open to new ideas from our constituents, and to incorporate them where appropriate, is absolutely essential to the execution of our mission.”

The small town of Berlin, Maryland, provides a good example of what a community can accomplish through public participation. With the combined effort of local citizens, businesses, and local government, Berlin’s downtown, once on the verge of dying, has been revitalized.
that our experiences with solid waste couldn’t be replicated with water and wastewater.

“The most effective process toward the development of an integrated solid waste management plan—which took the solid waste issue from ‘cradle to grave’ (point of origin to point of ultimate disposal)—was to involve the stakeholders in the development of the overall management plan,” he continues. “Basically this was accomplished through a series of meetings and homework assignments.

First we had to identify the ‘key players.’ These are the people with an interest in solid waste as well as the people empowered to make changes and/or implement the program. Then you divide the overall process into a series of accomplishable steps. You meet with the players and guide them through what is needed to accomplish each step. We would often leave them with a list of tasks to be accomplished before the next meeting.

“The main advantage to this process is that the stakeholders end up with a plan that is theirs,” says Coker. “They feel ownership and, therefore, the level of success in achieving goals and objectives is much higher.” (See the Summer 1999 issue of Water Sense for articles related to community self help.)

Officials in Spokane County, Washington, came up with an innovative way to involve residents in a comprehensive planning process. They developed a self-guided workshop called “Meeting in a Box.” The box includes an instruction manual, a 10-minute video, brochures, maps, a newsletter, and other information about comprehensive planning. Any interested individual, civic organization, or neighborhood group could reserve a box and host a workshop.

Apparently, the “Meeting in a Box” struck a chord with people in Spokane County: more than 2,500 people participated in 100 meetings at various locations. The cost to the county was minimal, reports the Municipal Research and Services Center of Washington (MRSC) a nonprofit, independent organization created in 1969 to help local governments, and the input from the meetings proved invaluable to the planning process.

Other communities have made effective use of different techniques: open houses, block parties, speakers’ bureaus, Web pages, e-mail listservs, citizen academies, cable TV, and newsletters. There’s no “one-size-fits-all” approach that will work in all places. Each community will have to decide which tools make the most sense for encouraging participation.

Finding the correct methods to elicit involvement is crucial, but nothing is more important than getting the right people interested. “The best-supported government policies result from collaborative efforts among government, citizens, stakeholders, and the civic and religious organizations that are the moral anchors of our communities,” the MRSC states on its Web site.

**Participation Has Pitfalls**

Although the idea of getting people involved is appealing, it doesn’t mean that it’s necessarily an easy process. Indeed, public participation can cut both ways.

“My experience has been that public input can be either invaluable in supporting a project or action, or incredibly nasty and negative against a project or action,” says Jean Holloway, training manager, Environmental Finance Center at the University of Maryland and a former town administrator. “The difference is often how well the community’s leaders have informed the public on the issues and implications involved in whatever is at hand. Lack of correct information usually breeds knee-jerk reactions to a subject and sometimes even correct information cannot counteract these reactions. The bottom line is that education and information is the most critical part of getting public input because without that information the public cannot make an informed decision, any more than an elected body could if it didn’t have complete information.”

Coker sees the main disadvantages as being the time required to hold the meetings and do the proper follow-up and to get people to do what they say they’re going to do.

“It is critical for the person facilitating this process to assist the group in identifying who is responsible for accomplishing each task,” says Coker. “Then you need to get the group to continuously review this so that it is the group (not the facilitator) that implements accountability. Often with volunteers (who usually make up most if not all of your workgroup), maintaining accountability is a real challenge.”

**The Bowling Alone Phenomenon**

In addition to the specific pitfalls mentioned above, any community seeking more involvement should not underestimate public willingness—or unwillingness—to participate. Spurred by anecdotal evidence, social scientists have devoted more and more attention to this topic, and have documented a sharp drop in civic involvement and widespread political apathy in recent times.

Robert Putnam, professor of public policy at Harvard University, describes this phenomenon in his 2000 best seller *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American*
Community. (The book’s title comes from the fact that, while more and more Americans are bowling, participation in bowling leagues has dropped over the last 50 years. People are, it seems, bowling alone rather than bowling together.) For Putnam, the fact that people seem less likely to do things with one another—on bowling teams, for instance—provides a metaphor for American civic life.

He exhaustively researches what he calls “social capital” and how public participation has declined: fewer people vote, church attendance is off, union membership is declining, and interest in public issues is at a nadir, to cite just a few of the factors Putnam investigated. “Weakened social capital is manifest in the things that have vanished almost unnoticed—neighborhood parties and get-togethers with friends, the unreflective kindness of strangers, the shared pursuit of the public good rather than a solitary quest for private goods,” writes Putnam in the book.

“The most startling fact about social connectedness is how pervasive are its effects,” Putnam explains in a September 2000 interview in the Atlantic Monthly. “We are not talking here simply about nostalgia for the 1950s. School performance, public health, crime rates, clinical depression, tax compliance, philanthropy, race relations, community development, census returns, teen suicide, economic productivity, campaign finance, even simple human happiness—all are demonstrably affected by how (and whether) we connect with our family and friends and neighbors and co-workers.”

How did this decline happen? Putnam finds a host of reasons, including some obvious ones—the isolating impact of television and the time constraints placed on two-income families, for example—and others that are less obvious, such as urban sprawl and the corresponding increase in commuting time. (See the Fall 2001 On Tap for more information about sprawl.)

Complicating matters is the fact that our society is more complex and our problems more entangled than in the past. “The overriding issues of three or four decades ago on which an unambiguous position was possible—above all, segregation and war—have given way to matters that are complex and murky,” writes Jean Bethke Elshtain, professor of social and political ethics at the University of Chicago, in the Autumn 2001 Wilson Quarterly. “We now see in shades of gray rather than black and white.

“It is difficult,” she continues, “to build a grand intellectual argument around how best to reform welfare, structure a tax cut, or protect the environment. Even many of our broader civic problems do not lend themselves to the sorts of thematic and cultural generalizations that have historically been the stuff of most public intellectual discourse. My point is not that the issues Americans now face raise no major ethical or conceptual concerns; rather, these concerns are so complex, and the arguments from all sides so compelling, that each side seems to have some part of the truth.”

Faced with this complexity, most people have become reluctant to get involved and, as a result, leave the solutions to “the experts,” Elshtain says. This lack of involvement further exacerbates the bowling alone problem Putnam describes.

Planning for Success

While any community wishing to solicit more public involvement must consider the many obstacles facing such an endeavor, proper planning can help to insure success. A good public participation project will have five general components: planning, education, communication, involvement, and follow-up.

Planning

As with most endeavors, a little planning will make citizen involvement go more smoothly. Alkaidy recommends that before leaders set meeting times or launch a public information campaign, they conceptualize the project by asking a series of questions:

• Who are the parties to be involved? Those affected by a project, those paying for it, or both?

• What do we wish to have performed by the participation program?

• How should people be involved?

• What are the appropriate participation methods?

• When, in this particular project, is participation key?

• Why do we want public input?

• What do we hope to achieve by this process?

Try to flesh out a timeline, costs, and key dates, working backward from the anticipated date of the project under discussion. Identify a facilitator for the project and decide whether or not any staff time (i.e., town employees) will be available to support the effort. For a really involved public participation project, a budget will be needed. For smaller projects, things like photocopying (and other expenses) may be done at the town hall.

Early in the process it’s also important to identify stakeholders

Those who work with local governments say that by engaging citizens through facilitated community meetings, questions can be answered and negative feelings turned around. Even the most ardent critics can appreciate necessary changes, such as water rate hikes, when presented with proper information.

Photos by Julie Black

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and the town’s “movers and shakers.” Alkadry recommends including residents, elected officials, appointed officials, area business leaders, including the Chamber of Commerce, and community leaders, and religious and other leaders. Holloway observes that these projects go best when you can get buy-in from the “E.F. Huttons in a small community —when they talk, people listen.”

Guide to Public Meetings

There are a number of ways to discuss issues with the public. Regardless of the discussion format, experts suggest that the forums be open, that all ideas be encouraged, and that participants feel valued.

Public Informational Meeting—These meetings are held when there is a need to inform the public about environmental issues or to explain new proposals. Informational meetings often have little opportunity for public input because the issue has often been decided (e.g., a new state or federal regulation)

Public Hearing—Similar to the public informational meeting, the public hearing is most often to hear comments about proposed rules and regulations. A public hearing is usually an official meeting, with documentation by an independent court reporter.

Advisory Board—These boards advise governments about regulations and technical guidance documents. They are a liaison between governments and the people they serve.

Charettes—This process uses an advisory panel of experts on the topic being discussed (and, frequently state officials), who help local communities create solutions to their environmental management problems.

Visioning—A technique, gaining in popularity for comprehensive planning, whereby people are encouraged to visualize what their community will look like in the future. Participants are then asked to identify short- and long-term goals, and develop ways to implement the vision.

Citizen Workshops—Workshops may be used for “brainstorming” ideas and finding solutions to community problems.

Education

“The first and most important hurdle in successful public involvement in any process is public education on and awareness of the issue(s) at hand,” says Holloway. “Informed public input should be welcomed as a part of the true democratic process. But, uninformed, often-biased public input is something that most town officials dread and try to avoid if at all possible. Unfortunately, that dread often makes them fall short on providing good public information, keeping things quiet for fear of stirring up a hornet’s nest on a potentially contentious issue.”

Assemble as much information as you can about the topic. Remember that people often respond best to visual images. Take the time to prepare large charts, maps, or diagrams that will help explain complex problems simply.

Communication

We live in the “Information Age,” but you wouldn’t necessarily know it by looking at how communities communicate with their residents. (See the article “Communicating Your Message” on page 26 for more information about public relations do’s and don’ts.) Getting the word out can be accomplished in a number of different ways:

• Newsletters—If there’s enough interest in a project, a newsletter can be invaluable. These range from multi-page, commercially printed productions to two-sided photocopies (remember to leave room for the mailing address).

• Web site—More and more, communities are turning to the Internet to post information. Setting up a Web site has never been easier. Once it’s up and running, updates can be made and there are no printing or mailing costs.

• Cable—Most cable television companies have a channel devoted to community events. This is typically a free service.

• TV and Radio—Radio and television stations make public service announcements about public events.

• Mailings—To reach customers, utilities, such as water, can include information with the monthly or quarterly bill.

One of the keys to effective communication is to get the message out in as many formats as possible and to repeat the message as often as possible. You never know where or when someone will hear what you’re saying.

Involvement

“One public education efforts have imparted the kind of information the public needs to know about a given issue or project, the public input and involvement part of the process can begin,” says Holloway. “It is important that the community not rely on a single public hearing as the sole mechanism for public input, even if that is all the law or charter requires. Public hearings typically bring out those who are against a project or who have a general complaint, whether it be project-related or not.

“Public input against the project may be the biggest concern,” she continues, “but to get a true measure of the public’s opinion, a community needs to see how its citizens feel about a proposed action in general. A single public hearing doesn’t usually bring out everyone who might have an opinion on a subject. Those who are left out may feel free to snipe at an action after it is already accomplished or underway, particularly if they can say that they didn’t even know about the hearing until after it was over.”

Follow-up

After a public meeting or other public event, be sure to follow-up with participants. If you’ve set up a Web site or have an e-mail listserv, post information as soon as possible. Mail a summary to those without Internet access. Provide information about the meeting results to any media who have covered the project planning.
It is also important to sit down with project leaders to assess citizen input. For the process itself, discern what worked and what didn’t. For the project being discussed, see what questions were raised and what additional information is needed for the next step. This analysis should be repeated through the entire participation process.

**Reinvigorating Communities**

Visiting Berlin today, it’s hard to visualize its former condition. Those familiar with the town’s rebirth credit strong civic involvement from a number of different people and groups for sparking this transformation.

“Berlin is the best example of a town coming together that I’ve ever seen,” says Holloway. “The community, the Chamber of Commerce, business leaders, elected officials, and residents all got on the same page as to what was needed in the downtown, and each segment took a certain role and responsibility in the implementation of the final plan. The town passed legislation enabling the development area and a district management authority, the local business community and some private investors formed a syndicate to leverage investment and tax credits for historic restoration, and so on.

“This work has paid off for them many times over in the listing of their entire downtown on the National Historic Register, the increase in business to the area, and the filming of Runaway Bride,” she says. “The downtown effort was a good example of how a common focus or mission, good information and input can result in a successful effort.”

To merely sum up the investment in Berlin’s infrastructure, the increase in business activity, and the corresponding boon in tax revenues, while no doubt important, would be to paint an incomplete picture of what Berlin’s revitalization has meant. By working together, the town enjoys a renewed spirit of cooperation and sense of purpose. “It has breathed new life into the community,” says Holloway.

With public participation, the effort, it seems, is at least as important as the technique used or the outcome derived. The very process of seeking citizen involvement, proponents argue, will yield unforeseen dividends and, in the end, provide results far beyond what the experts might initially conceive.

Putnam writes in *Bowling Alone*, “Whether the specific suggestions I have made . . . are persuasive or not is less important than the possibility that we may have a national debate about how to make our institutions more social capital-friendly. In the end, however, institutional reform will not work—indeed, it will not happen—unless you and I, along with our fellow citizens, resolve to become reconnected with our friends and neighbors. Henry Ward Beecher’s advice a century ago to ‘multiply picnics’ is not entirely ridiculous today. We should do this, ironically, not because it will be good for America—though it will be—but because it will be good for us.”

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**Information About Public Participation**

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) is the primary advocacy group for those involved in public participation. Their Web site provides a good overview of the topic. Visit it at www.iap2.org. You may also write to IAP2 Headquarters, 11166 Huron Street, Suite 27, Denver, CO 80234 or call toll free (800) 644-4273.

The League of Women Voters (LWV) publishes *Strategies for Effective Public Involvement: Drinking Water Source Assessment and Protection*, which is available free-of-charge from the National Drinking Water Clearinghouse. To order this book, call (800) 624-8301 or (304) 293-4191 or email ndwc_orders@mail.nesc.wvu.edu and request item #DWBLP75. To learn more about the LWV and the efforts to promote safe drinking water and public participation, visit their Web site at www.lwv.org or write to 1730 M Street, NW, Washington DC, 20036 or call (202) 429-1965.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has information about public participation and the environment on their Web site at www.epa.gov/stakeholders. The report *Engaging the American People: A Review of EPA’s Public Participation Policy and Regulations with Recommendations for Action* (EPA 240-R-00-005) is available on the site or by writing to EPA Office of Policy, Economics and Innovation (MC 1807), 1200 Pennsylvania Ave NW, Washington, DC 20460. Printed copies may also be ordered by calling (202) 260-3096 or by sending an e-mail to kahn.lisa@epa.gov.

The EPA guide “Building Support for Increased User Fees” (EPA #430/09-89-006), includes a step-by-step guide to building and implementing a public education program. Ordering information is the same as above.

The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection’s (DEP) public participation policy is a good example of how state government can provide information to and seek input from citizens. The policy is available on the DEP Web site at www.dep.state.pa.us/dep/subject/bs95006.htm or by writing to PA DEP, PO Box 2063, Harrisburg, PA 17105, or call (717) 783-2300.

For more information about Spokane County, Washington’s “Meeting in a Box,” log on to www.spokanecounty.org/plan ning/mib.htm or write to Spokane County Court House, 1116 West Broadway Ave, Spokane, WA 99260.

The National Environmental Training Center for Small Communities publishes a training skills handbook that explains how adults learn—an important consideration for planning public participation. The 59-page book costs $8.50 plus shipping and handling, and may be ordered by calling (800) 624-8301 or by sending an e-mail to netc_orders@mail.nesc.wvu.edu.

Request item #TRBKTR13.