

Improving Performance and Accountability in Local Government with Citizen Participation

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One of the important challenges in the new millennium will be to find successful ways to engage the public in shaping the communities of the future. Building upon the social capital in a community will be essential. Many indicators suggest that levels of civic engagement, civic participation, and civic trust declined during the last two decades of the 20th century. The decline in participation and trust revolve, in part, around the issues of programmatic and individual performance as well as the accountability of decision makers and individuals for outcomes and actions. It will no longer be sufficient for public officials and local governments to demonstrate efficiency (doing more with less) and sound business principles (MBO, TQM, and High Performance). They must go further to demonstrate their accountability for the appropriate, proper and intended use of resources.

What is the role of the citizen in a democratic society? The question is more than 2,400 years old and the debates on the topic have been lively. It is time to make a shift in the public participation paradigm as we move into a new century. The need to make the shift is created not because the old paradigms have failed but because the evolution of the civic culture has created a new operating environment for public officials and it demands a paradigm shift. The challenge is to shift the paradigm of the political system from the “expert/professional” model with institutional and functional separation of powers, roles, responsibilities and duties to one that integrates the citizen into every aspect of governance. The traditional paradigm provides for linkages to citizens primarily through electoral politics, public opinion polls, customer satisfaction surveys, public hearings, organized group activities, and individual contacts. Consultation in the traditional paradigm is largely passive, while involvement is episodic.

From the early 19th century, two trends have dominated the political participation landscape in western democracies. One of those trends has been the expansion of the franchise to include previously excluded categories of residents. The other trend has been the evolution of institutions that control access to political power such as political parties, interest groups, and entrenched bureaucracies. Further, the expansion of the franchise and the growth in population has reinforced the Federalists arguments for a republican form of government with elected representatives making decisions and citizens relegated to voting or other forms of participation such as public hearings, forums, petitions, protests, and service on volunteer boards, commissions, or similar types of activities. Political parties and other institutions for engaging citizens are very focused upon engineering majorities and minimizing the costs (especially time) associated with too much direct involvement. Government institutions are likewise reluctant to bear the costs associated with widespread engagement activities. Thus, the role of the citizen as an engaged partner in the governing process has been supplanted by governing through positional and organizational leaders who are bound by rules, procedures and traditions that leaves governing to the “experts.” (Gibson and Lacy, 2002). Citizens play a secondary role in setting agendas, developing budgets, implementing programs, or evaluating outcomes. Further, citizens have only minimal information about the details of the public's business except in an episodic manner often caused by some news story that focuses national, state, or local attention on an issue. The result in the minds of many citizens is that a wide gulf exists between the expectations associated with democratic theory and the practice of democracy in community governance.

Many community and public leaders as well as many public officials are beginning to realize that public participation is important in an environment where the citizens have a diminished trust in government and are demanding more accountability from public officials (Parr and Gates, 1989). Chrislip and Larson (1994) contend that the push for reform is a response to demands from citizens for an authentic role in improving their communities. Created by frustration with the status quo, “[c]itizens begin to collaborate because nothing else is working to address their concerns. And nothing else is working because there are significant obstacles or barriers to change that civic and political leadership, as traditionally practiced, have failed to overcome” (15).

A study by the Kettering Foundation (1989) indicated that public administrators want relationships with citizens but found that they create delays and increase red tape. In turn, citizens felt that when their input was sought, it was rarely used to make administrative decisions. Some citizens felt that their concerns would be heard only if they organized into angry activist groups.

In an alternative paradigm, citizens would play a significant role at the strategic vision level. The professional literature and the participation awards from local government associations are filled with examples of significant levels of community involvement in various activities from strategic planning and visioning to single purpose activities in functional areas such as economic development, education, land use, and recreation. Administrators, elected officials, and community leaders have found that institutionalized neighborhood participation in the policy processes results in a more informed, effective, and participatory citizenry (Berry, Portney, and Thompson; 1993). In Nalbandian’s research on new roles for local government managers, responding professionals said they could foresee a future in which citizens are fully engaged in local governance through organizations such as neighborhood councils and would increasingly take over many of the responsibilities traditionally associated with city councils and administrators such as setting priorities and evaluating service delivery (1999, 190).

The first change in an alternative paradigm must occur at the conceptual level where the public’s business is the public’s business. In the conceptual shift community residents will be actively encouraged to participate, invited into the process, and fully armed with the knowledge and information to make participation meaningful. Citizens will help define community goals, develop agendas, develop strategic initiatives, participate in and review implementation procedures, actively participate in the measurement of progress, and in assessing impacts of programs.

At the operational level, public officials will be engaged more frequently and effectively with citizens to understand the desires and expectations of community residents. In the new paradigm, the moral imperative for engaging community residents will shift to public administrators and managers. This holistic conceptualization will require effective managerial leadership “outside the policy implementation and management box.”

Measures of performance and accountability traditionally have been the primary concern and central focus of public managers and administrators. They focused on short-term financial management and control in which accountability was defined in terms of accountants, budget analysts, and financial directors. Recently however, governments have extended their accountability focus to include concern for long-term management issues and public sector performance (Andrews, 2001, 10). Durant contends that accountability must be built into the entire program structure (1999). Results from his research with the Maryland County Department of Health and Human Services indicate that reforms must be made to link strategy and structure, to think strategically about anticipating and overcoming obstacles, and to focus on processes rather than tasks (331).

Kearns, however, offers a more useful interpretation of accountability and performance. The approach "...embraces a broader conception of accountability—one that is perhaps messier than the precise operational definitions, but probably more consistent with the popular usage of the term" (1996, 9). He contends that the popular view includes much more than the formal processes normally associated with the terms. He advances the proposition that:

...the term accountability generally refers to a broad spectrum of public expectations dealing with organizational performance, responsiveness, and even morality of government and nonprofit organizations. These expectations often include implicit performance criteria—related to obligations and responsibilities—that are subjectively interpreted and sometimes even contradictory (9).

The creation of the broader definition based upon popular interpretation provides a plausible explanation for part of the disconnect and distrust that citizens have toward their governments. Behn broadens the definition of accountability to include not only financial accountability, accountability for fairness (democratic governance), and accountability for performance, adding a fourth dimension as well: accountability for personal probity which requires incorporation of citizen interests into the accountability framework (2001). Governments have internalized the concepts of accountability and performance in such a way that citizens do not perceive that public actions often conform to the popular expectations. The concept advanced by Kearns (1990) fits more closely into popular expectations and perceptions about the nature of the "social compact." Some scholars have found the broader view of accountability to be useful especially for overcoming some of the problems associated with traditional models of the governance process. Stivers calls these changed relationships "active accountability":

Administrative legitimacy requires active accountability to citizens, from whom the ends of government derive. Accountability, in turn, requires a shared framework for the interpretation of basic values, one that must be developed jointly by bureaucrats and citizens in real-world situations, rather than assumed. The legitimate administrative state, in other words, is one inhabited by active citizens (247).

For the broader interpretation of accountability and performance to be useful and to satisfy popular interpretations of the terms, the entire governance paradigm needs to be redesigned.

While a paradigm shift and a redesign of process is important, leaders and public agencies must actively develop and use a wider variety of means and methods to inform and engage the public in public business. Leaders must find ways to engage all citizens by developing better and more frequent use of old tools such as surveys, advisory committees, performance review committees, and community forums to make participation more meaningful. The development of electronic communication and instant messaging hold great promise for the future if developed properly. Public access cable television has been around for a while, but public officials increasingly must make more effective use of web sites, chat rooms, electronic bulletin boards, electronic town halls, email and a myriad of other tools to communicate with, inform, and engage citizens. Decision-makers must be better prepared to meet the expectations and demands for higher standards of accountability and accessibility in the electronic age. Direct democracy offers the opportunity not only for citizens to become more informed but also for leaders, planners, and officials to ascertain what programs and decisions are important to citizens and to demonstrate and communicate performance and accountability in more meaningful ways.

Schachter (1997) challenges us to view ourselves as owners of government, not mere customers of public services. Box (1998) advocates a citizen governance model of conducting the public's business. King and Stivers (1998) advance a model related to Box's also placing citizens at the center of the governing process playing an authentic role in policy formation. Chrislip and Larson (1994) advocate a fundamental orientation to public policy setting built on a collaborative relationship between citizens, elected public officials and public managers. At the heart of this discussion is an examination of the relationship between citizens, elected officials and public managers.

Nalbandian (1994 and 1999), Golbembiewski and Gabris (1994), and Roberts (1997) also have furthered the discussion of governmental reform by focusing on the role of public managers. As citizen expectations for government and their role in government processes change, public leaders will be challenged to respond to those changes.

Drawing on both Schlesinger's cycles of political history model and Kaufman's model of shifts in public values, Box contends that these larger trends are mirrored at the local level. He maintains that we are currently "on the down slope of a long wave of local government reform, headed toward an uncertain destination" (1998, 18). What are the implications of this push for governmental reform? According to Box, "...it means redefinition of roles and processes of creating and implementing policy that are citizen centered rather than bureaucracy centered" (19). Thus, the current period of governmental reform focusing on changing the relationship between citizens and government serves as a springboard for developing the concept of citizen governance. Indeed, an enhanced concept of governance forms the foundation of Box's model of public management. Governance includes citizens, elected public officials, and public managers. That model is built on an expanded concept of governance that he refers to as "...the way citizens, representatives, and practitioners can join together in governing communities so that the strengths of each are brought to bear in addressing the challenges of the next century" (19).

Models of Community Planning and Engagement

For the engaged community to develop, grow and flourish, professional administrators and managers must play a key role in the process to bridge the gap between traditional theory of governing and the practice of governing an engaged community. To support this argument consider the following proposition about the governance process as we usually experience it.

Elected officials are focused most often upon engineering the calculus of majorities and building majority coalitions through electoral politics. Their goal is to seek followers and build a support base. Rarely are their goals to create partners in the governing processes. Professional administrators and managers must play the critical role in bridging the gap between the theory and practice of democratic governance. Public servants will need to guide elected officials through the mazes of citizen engagement while at the same time developing, fostering and nurturing the civic participation processes in their governments. A dilemma that every public sector administrator faces is that of the appropriate role for their activities. The "Codes of Ethics" and "Standards of Conduct" from professional associations such as the International City/County Management Association and the American Society for Public Administration raise several "red flags" that cause some administrator to limit their active roles with citizen engagement processes. Both conduct standards and ethics codes caution public sector managers about direct involvement in local politics. The challenge arises when administrators and managers try to provide leadership during situations where communities are divided and in conflict. In practice, however, local government

administrators are already engaged in facilitative leadership at the community level, and for some it has become comfortable.

Many communities are involved in some forms of community engagement processes that involve residents in various aspects of the governance process. Virtually every local government is either required or empowered to appoint advisory committees. These citizen committees are most often appointed in specific sectors to provide advice on specific issues such as land use planning, zoning, recreation, transportation, economic development, and sometimes on budget and finance. Occasionally, and more often as a sporadic response to local situations, communities will engage in a more comprehensive strategic planning processes that engage a larger number of citizens in processes that are apart from the formal advisory structure. These broader community strategic or comprehensive planning process have not been studied as systematically as many of the sector specific planning processes. There are numerous case studies of the typical advisory or sector planning processes such as economic development, land use and recreation. Yet, there are few attempts to develop a systematic body of knowledge of local strategic or comprehensive planning processes that engage the community in non-traditional planning processes.

Several years ago, a team of educators whose members provided programs to assist community leaders and decision makers in the process of community strategic planning began to explore the circumstances and conditions that surround the dynamics of community planning. The initial study was defined by team members in their roles as participant observers in projects with more than forty local governments in Virginia. The initial results for the framework were presented at a conference in Richmond, Virginia. (Lacy, Dougherty, Gibson and Miller, 1993). In 2002, a revised version of the model was presented at a Conference on Community Resource and Economic Development in Orlando, FL. The various approaches observed among the local governments involved in this study illustrate the power of the participatory process.

During the study of the selected strategic planning efforts, a number of important indicators were identified to help evaluate the processes. These included the reason the process was initiated, who initiated it, and the likely outcomes. The process may be initiated to create a common community agenda or it may be used as a means to build teamwork among a locality's administrative staff. The process may be initiated by a member of the organization's governing board and/or by its Chief Administrative Officer (CAO). The process is most likely to be used following a change in the organization's political or administrative leadership or when the community is facing an operational environment that is either in crisis or stagnant. Finally, the process may produce a document designed to guide the future development of programs and policies. Alternatively, the process may be designed to provide for a significant reduction in the amount of conflict, tension and stress that might exist either between or within three basic decision centers – members of the governing body, the administrative team and staff, and/or the community. The resultant classification of models of engagement includes four broad types of engagement that are discussed in the paragraphs that follow.

The traditional model is the **managerial model**. It is the most common of the four strategic planning models and is closely related to those strategic planning models found in the private sector. It is top down, follows fairly rigid prescribed steps, is very linear in its application and provides very little room for meaningful stakeholder participation. The process is initiated by the community's CAO in order to accomplish one or more of the following purposes:

1. to build a common agenda;
2. to develop greater interaction and communication between members of the administrative team;

3. to create a feeling of ownership towards the agenda for the members of the administrative team; and
4. to develop and enhance teamwork.

This form of strategic planning is used most frequently when it occurs within six to nine months following a change in the organization's administrative leadership, or anytime after there has been substantial turnover in key members of the organization's administrative staff. It is most effective when an organization exists in a very stable or stagnant operational environment that provides little motivation to search for innovative approaches to solve problems.

A second model is the **legislative model**. The second most widely used model, it usually is initiated to develop an action agenda to guide and direct the decisions of the organization's governing body and administrative team. Usually the organization's CAO and one or more members of the governing body initiate the process. It is most effective if used when the organization exists in an operating environment experiencing either rapid growth or significant decline, and the organization lacks an agenda for action. This second model of local government strategic planning is initiated to accomplish any combination of the following seven goals:

1. to develop a common agenda;
2. to explore the operational styles and establish operational guidelines;
3. to create understanding between the organization's governing body and its chief administrative officer;
4. to develop greater interaction and communication between members of the organizations governing body and its chief administrative officer;
5. to develop and enhance teamwork;
6. to develop community acceptance "buy-in" of an agenda for use by the organization's governing body and administrative team as a guide for making decisions and distributing resources; or
7. to reaffirm and further legitimize an already existing agenda.

In some variations the process is initiated by members of the community's governing body. Under these circumstances the locality's CAO and administrative staff are likely to be actively involved in promoting the process. This type of application usually occurs when members of the local governing body have held office for an extended period. It is most effective when the organization exists in either a stable or stagnant operational environment with no signs of crisis. The results and outcomes of the strategic planning process in this situation include: the development of an agenda; the development of community acceptance, or "buy-in" of that agenda; and the legitimization of decisions made by the community's governing body and/or administrative team.

A third model is the **limited community participation model**. The process is characterized by the appointment of a Blue Ribbon Commission, usually composed of well-known or well-positioned community and business leaders. The select commission usually meets for a period of weeks or months, makes a report, and dissolves. The amount of community input is very limited in most cases with a limited number of community meetings, forums or surveys. Often the process is initiated to achieve one or both of the following two purposes:

1. to open up the decision-making process and increase citizen participation and interaction with the governing body; or
2. to generate harmony within the governing body and/or within the community.

Focusing on one of these two goals, members of the community's governing body usually initiate the process. The community's CAO and administrative staff also may be involved in initiating the

process. This type of application usually occurs when there are some mild to moderately strong divisions between the governing body and the community. It is most effective if used when a community is experiencing stress during times of dramatic growth or decline. The application of a strategic planning process under these conditions typically results in the creation of a project report (usually very general in overall character and scope); reduced stress within the governing body and/or community; and the creation of common agenda shared between the governing body and community. For the most part, the activities surrounding the planning process continue for 10 to 18 months. After the citizens complete a report and present it to the governing body, the strategic planning activities begin to diminish.

The fourth model is the **community empowerment model**. It is built around extensive community participation and is designed as an empowerment process to develop a community agenda and engage the residents of the community over a long period of time. Usually the process is initiated by a proactive governing body. The organization's administrative team may be involved, but only at the request of the governing body. It is most effective if used when the community is not under significant stress and when there are no "open wounds" in the body politic. Also, its effectiveness is greatest when the community is broadly represented, and when the governing body legitimizes the process without exercising tight control over it. This type of application typically produces the following results and outcomes: a community agenda; a lengthy report that takes the governing body several work sessions to discuss and consider; and community cohesion achieved through a greater understanding of important community issues and processes. In the most successful cases an institutionalized process to ensure continued participation by residents is established. A review board or similar institution is created to provide for regular monitoring of the progress toward the goals that were established during the process.

Engaged Communities

More recent examples of different forms of engagement from three states have been selected to illustrate the variety of forms of planned citizen engagement processes where community residents were encouraged to participate at every level.

In a recent project designed to help rural communities in Virginia develop the capacities needed to prosper in the Information Age economy, seven counties participated in this multi-faceted project in which citizens were given the leadership and technology training to run their own community networks (for a complete description of the project and evaluation, see <http://top.bev.net>). Whereas the immediate purpose of the project was to improve economic conditions through business listings and a virtual business incubator, it was the citizen visioning meetings, the discussion forum, and new access to governmental pages that stirred citizen dialogue. In many of these counties, citizens were given their first opportunity to ask questions about board agendas, the local school pages, and local government committees. Not only did they begin to ask questions, local leaders soon discovered that they were accountable for updating information and had to respond to this new electronic medium.

Coshocton County Ohio is another example of extensive efforts to inform and engage the community in the processes of developing a land use plan for the county. A Commission on Future Land Uses was appointed by the County Commissioners. The Commission, in turn, recruited more than 100 citizens to serve on Task Forces to prepare recommendations for 11 key areas of concern for land use. The meetings of the Commission and the Task Forces were announced on weekly radio programs and in weekly newspaper columns. The Commission took the initiative to post reports of each task force on The Ohio State University County Extension web site. The revised

reports were posted periodically along with scheduled meetings so that interested citizens could stay informed during the 14 month process. Such processes of using traditional committee structures, newspapers, radio, and community meetings that are supplemented with current electronic communication provide an insight into a new wave of possibilities of informing and engaging citizens.

The Ritchie County Development Authority in the Ohio River Valley of West Virginia decided to hold public meetings around the county it served. About 115 people participated in these sessions, with three of the meetings drawing over 30 people. While the overall document developed through the engagement process was not much different than if had been developed solely by the authority's board of directors, ideas put forth by residents were reflected throughout. This led to some different ideas – literally the last statement at the last meeting was something that had not been discussed previously and was incorporated into the plan. It also has increased the legitimacy and acceptance of the plan in the small, rural county. This in turn has permitted the development authority to seek project partners both among other organizations in the county as well as on a regional basis in its efforts to follow the recommendations put forth in the plan.

Nicholas County in central West Virginia has recently concluded an eight-month strategic planning process to help determine its future direction. A select group of about 35 key individuals representing virtually every major concern was appointed to the Strategic Planning Committee by the County Commission. This group met in four work sessions – three to draft the plan and one to finalize it. The ideas and energy are reflected in a strategic plan that has been accepted by the County Commission and is expected to serve as a guide to the entire community.

Morrow County, Ohio, used an extensive process during six months to engage more than seventy five residents in a process to develop an economic development plan for the county. Extensive community survey work supplemented the numerous community meetings. The result was a plan that was adopted with considerably informed community support.

There are numerous examples of states and localities involving citizens in their planning processes. In the cases of the states of Minnesota and Oregon, the cities of Gresham, Oregon and Scottsdale, Arizona and Hillsboro County, Florida, strategic planning, budgeting, and benchmarking are combined into some of the best examples of broad based approaches to incorporating citizens or stakeholders into the process. In each case, regular reviews of strategic goals and progress are conducted. Citizens are heavily involved in the processes of planning, budgeting, and evaluating progress. These five instances provide good examples of citizen engagement in strategic planning linked to budgets, benchmarks, and monitored by citizen review boards. In addition, each of these efforts has identified new governance processes in which citizens are improving governmental accountability through their participation.

Developing Patterns of Community Engagement

An examination of the various cases of community engagement provides some useful lessons about those factors and conditions that contribute to the success of engagement processes.

Flexibility is one of the key ingredients for establishing a successful community engagement process for any form of community planning. Each community or public sector organization with its unique blend of stakeholders/citizens, strengths/weaknesses, and decision-making roles/responsibilities must design and implement a process that will work effectively in its particular

environment. A community that begins an engagement process must be prepared to modify whatever initial model is developed to guide the process. The group dynamics that often emerge during an engagement process are likely to alter different steps and objectives in the process. It may even be necessary to alter the timetables established for completing the process.

Further, developing *widely accepted measures of success or progress* is essential for sustaining community planning processes. The process must have a structure in which evaluation and accountability are part of the long term process for sustaining increased levels of engagement. Unless community residents can see evidence that their participation has meaning and produces results, a greater degree of cynicism and withdrawal are likely to become part of the community landscape.

Planning initiatives must have *renewal mechanisms* built into the processes if they are to have longevity. Provisions must be made for some form of *progress review board or independent oversight committee* to continually monitor progress toward defined goals and strategic objectives. Further, the process should provide mechanisms to engage community residents in periodic reviews of the work from the original planning process by using a process similar to the original planning process. The emphasis on engagement and participation must be as strong as during the initial process. The timeframe for the review process can be shorter since the review would be based upon the work and documents from the earlier initiative. Too often there is little systematic effort to sustain the interest and momentum generated during the original planning process. It is not uncommon to hear community residents who are invited to participate in a community planning process say something like: “We have done that before and nothing has happened,” or Why should we bother? Nothing happened the last time we did this!” Residents most know that the process will continue through annual reviews and periodic periods of broadened engagement. Further, it is important to provide opportunities for those who want to continue to participate in some meaningful way to work toward the identified goals and objectives.

Too little attention is paid to the details of the types of leadership that are needed to create a successful effort to facilitate community engagement process. When appointments are made to the “Commission on the Future,” the “Strategic Planning Committee,” or the “Steering Committee,” it is important for the appointing authorities to treat their appointment decisions as personnel decisions with the same interest and concerns used to hire fulltime staff. Considerable time must be devoted to finding a broad representative mix of knowledgeable residents who are known to have the ability to work in a collaborative manner with others even in circumstances where they may disagree with the final decision. Selecting individuals with the appropriate leadership qualities are necessary to build a successful engagement process. Without good leadership, the community engagement process likely will not produce the desired result nor will it lead to a sustained process of engagement.

Thus, we have found that the governance process in which community planning is combined with benchmarking and performance monitoring, is a vital link for reconnecting citizens through the participatory process and for developing a more visible measure of accountability. Performance measures and benchmarks can be used effectively to build higher levels of trust among residents. We contend that these measures must be developed through negotiated processes where community residents are actively engaged to define desired outcomes, expected accomplishments, and acceptable results. Communities and governmental organizations that engage residents and partner with them in all aspects of programming and policy making to define performance standards and measures of success will enhance, in very significant ways, public perception of accountability.

Morse suggests that we need to build new patterns of civic interaction. She believes that, “[t]here are capacities that exist in every community that hold strong potential for building new patterns of interaction that can renew our sense of responsibility and commitment to each other” (1996, 2). Implied in these new patterns of civic interaction is the need for an expanded concept of citizenship. The convergence of a new leadership paradigm and demands by citizens for an authentic role in public decision-making calls upon the institutions of government and public officials to nurture these newly emerging sets of expectations of individual citizens and to build the intellectual, cultural and institutional infrastructure to support the expectations of consultation and engagement. Also, implied in Morse’s observation is the need for action, for a fully engaged pool of citizens. Citizenship demands more of us than voting, indeed, we need to be reminded that “Democracy is not something that *is*, but something you *do*” (Center for Democracy and Citizenship, 1995, 2). Morse’s statement also encompasses the concept of community and concern for the well being of the community as a whole. In short, parochial interests must be weighed against the interests of a much broader community.

Making a shift in the paradigm as an intellectual construct is likely to be less of a problem than convincing elected officials and the public that there is reason to participate in a process that provides no assurances that something productive will result from the process. Programs that are designed to increase participation for the sake of participation are not likely to meet the criteria of “meaningful.” Likewise, as Rosener observes, mandating participation does not provide the assurance that quality participation will occur (1978, 462). The expanded concept of citizen participation must permeate the entire governance processes. Leaders in this new paradigm must utilize important civic skills such as: group formation and dynamics; problem solving orientation in group processes; active listening; willingness to accept differing views; and a mind-set that recognizes that public decision-making is messy and often contentious. Programs that rest solely on satisfaction surveys, benchmarking practices, or even electronic interaction provide only the limited possibilities available. Performance and Accountability must become everyone’s responsibility in an expanded governance society. However, if citizens and leaders alike approach public processes with an eye toward the common good, the result can be very rewarding. Indeed, it can form the basis for strong and vibrant communities. By opening the entire governance structure to public participation through agenda setting, strategic planning, program evaluation, and monitoring, democratic governance can become a permanent part of our civic culture.

Perhaps there is greater reason for optimism than reflected in the assessment by Box (1998) just a few years ago that we are “on the down slope of a long wave of local government reform” (5). The blending together of traditional models of engagement with the potential of the electronic media is just beginning to feed and strengthen the engagement process. One of the interesting undercurrents during the past two decades has been the growing number of community groups, neighborhood associations and civic associations that have become standard features of many local landscapes. As these civic associations and local engagement groups mature the process of engagement will have a more formalized infrastructure just outside, but connected to, the governance structures of communities.

Many communities, such as Columbus, Ohio, have developed formal neighborhood governance structures that are staffed and supported by the city, but left to make local decisions or recommendations and function independently of city hall. The engaged community, often born in single issue protests, is only in its infancy. However, it appears that many of these single issue/episodic engagement processes have morphed into avenues for public officials to reach out and tap citizen interests, energy and knowledge. These transformed civic impulses have become part of the more formalized infrastructure of civic engagement where citizens are brought in the

governance structure through committees, commissions and task forces or have become part of formalized neighborhood or civic associations. Only time will tell if the engaged community trend can be sustained.

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