by John Nalbandian

Predicting the Future: Why Citizen Engagement No Longer Is Optional

For years, we who are involved in local government have treated citizen engagement as an option to enhance policymaking and community building in local government. I would argue that now engagement no longer is an option; it is imperative. It is made mandatory by the challenging and often confusing context of contemporary local governance, increasingly characterized by the ad hoc presence of foundations, nongovernmental organizations, private firms, and other nongovernmental actors in processes and decisions that significantly affect community development and well-being.

If we are to anticipate effectively and plan for coherence in community building as an overarching goal of professionalism in local government, we must find a way to channel toward the collective good the diversity of actors, their energy, and their collaborative minds. One way to do this is through a significant commitment and more systematic approach to planned citizen engagement.

To understand the role of engagement, first we must distinguish two types. The initial form is spontaneous. This is the expression of citizenship that local government professionals have grown to expect and often dismiss as emotion driven, self-interested, and influence yielding.

Planned engagement, an alternative form, has taken time to reach a place of legitimacy in the administrative arsenal in part, I would maintain, because we lump all engagement under the same rubric—the one we would prefer to avoid! But we must realize that planned engagement is different. It leads to an expression of the rational community mind as it deals with issues of community importance, as a balance to the emotion that comes from the heart in spontaneous engagement.

Planned engagement comes in many shapes and sizes but, generally speaking, it brings diverse groups together either as individuals or as representatives in semiformal, facilitated settings to plan and problem solve. A local government may use its authority, for example, to convene groups and individuals to discuss and make recommendations for revision to a comprehensive land use master plan or to join in a strategic planning effort for the community as a whole.

As another example, in Lewisham, one of the boroughs of London, a 1,000-member citizen panel has been created to provide feedback to the government on issues of importance and to provide answers needed from citizen surveys. From the panel, juries are drawn occasionally to hear testimony from experts and then to render a recommendation to the governing body on a pressing issue.[1]

Community consultant David Chrislip writes, "Joint Venture Silicon Valley addressed a wide range of needs including education, transportation, work force development, environmental issues, and economic development. The long running initiative led to the creation of several new organizations and numerous partnerships to meet these needs."[2]

What is driving this need and the imperative response I am suggesting? To respond, I will sketch a broader perspective that establishes the contemporary context for the argument that planned engagement is a critical element in the public administrator's toolbox.

TRENDS: MODERNITY AND IDENTITY

Two overarching global trends affect local government policymaking.[3] The first is administrative modernization, and the second is the search for identity—who we were, who we are, and what we aspire to become. Administrative modernization is driven by the combination of capitalism, technology, the importance of efficiency as a value, and the unbounded desire to acquire wealth.

At the local level, this force expresses itself with examples like GIS and GPS applications, pavement condition indices (PCI), newer and still newer ways of electronically communicating within organizations and with citizens, and software that integrates human resource and financial systems.

But we must realize that this force extends far beyond local government. We see it throughout our daily lives with credit cards that will purchase anything, phones that will do everything, airports distinguishable only by their architecture, and on and on. Modernization worldwide standardizes our lives in ways we find both compelling and disturbing. By embracing modernization, we experience efficiency, quality, consistency, and familiarity in products, services, and processes—at least those are the goals.

Politics today is as much about creating, maintaining, and preserving identity as it is about rational policymaking.

But modernization's wide and indiscriminate swath wipes out uniqueness, spontaneity, tradition, and identity. Decisions about which streets to pave no longer are politically determined by council—the PCI ensures that. Evidence-based decision making replaces hunches and experience in managing money, in gambling, in marketing, in sports, and in local government.

The second trend that helps create the need for planned engagement is a reaction to modernization. None of us can live without tradition, spontaneity, and identity; and identity is the key. Why has McDonald's, an exemplar of modernization, become a community space for regular customers who become familiar not only with each other but also with the employees?

I was driving across Iowa, and I stopped at a McDonald's in rural America. I asked the manager, "Do you have regulars?" She said, "Of course. We have become the break space for the company located across the street." In my own McDonald's (my own!), the employees refer to the regulars by name. We are trying to make unique and personal what is on its face heartless.

Identity is the victim of modernization; but we fight the battle, land use issue by land use issue! Spontaneous engagement is an emotional response to our everyday lives, which we often believe others control. Thus, we act as if we own our neighborhoods; it is our meager response to perceived loss of identity and control of our future. Politics today is as much about creating, maintaining, and preserving identity as it is about rational policymaking.

HOW TO CREATE POSSIBILITIES

Now we come to the heart of the argument. The challenge that results from juxtaposing these two worlds is realizing not only that a growing gap exists between contemporary politics (the search for identity) and administration (modernization) but operationally that the gap represents the distance between what is politically acceptable (the search for identity) and administratively feasible (modernization). The greater this distance, the more difficult it is to enact policy that matters and can be implemented effectively.

The greater challenge here is that the gap between what is politically acceptable and administratively feasible is growing because the modernization trend makes local government professionals—in contrast with elected officials—more capable than their predecessors at their work. Today's professionals are more skilled than their predecessors owing in large part to the positive effects of modernization; one cannot say the same about elected officials.

This is not meant to demean the skills of elected officials. It simply

recognizes that the tools of administration are advancing at a more rapid rate than the tools of politics. The summary message here is that the gap is growing and must be bridged if effective policymaking is the goal, and this is the challenge that contemporary professionals face—worldwide.

Because contemporary communities find themselves increasingly responding to issues of identity, and to entrants whose interests may be narrowly even if publicly motivated, we must find methods of bridging the gap in ways that are institutionally acceptable as well as effective in producing results legitimized by citizens. If we do not—if we continue to govern issue by issue, actor by actor—issues of identity will not be addressed even if individual policies and services are decided and delivered.

Planned engagement holds promise in part because it can be initiated by the council—a governing institution using its power to convene—and enhanced and broadened with such tools of modernization as surveys, structured and facilitated meetings, and administrative expertise. Planned engagement can also provide a place for the energizing passion that infuses issues of identity.

The Lewisham citizen panel is a case in point. As another example closer to home, Carol (my wife) and I with assistance from Doug Griffen[4] facilitated a strategic planning retreat with a seven-member council. Doug brought a computer for each person, and each computer was tied to the central computer at Doug's station. We posed questions of identity: "After 10 years of no contact with anyone in your city, you return and you say, 'This is perfect; it is exactly how I wanted it to turn out.' What have you seen or heard that leads you to your conclusion?"

Responses were then sent from individual computers, collated and edited to avoid duplication, and posted on a screen for all to see. We developed themes among the disparate responses and, once this was done, we asked each councilmember to write a paragraph that captured the "heart of the matter."

We continued and developed goals and objectives, and at the end of the day, we got a product that took advantage of the tools of modernization but in the service of community building.

PLANNED ENGAGEMENT AND THE FUTURE OF PROFESSIONALISM

As we think about the future, the issue is not whether engagement in whatever form is going to occur. It already is present and powerful.

Evidence-based decision making replaces hunches and experience in managing money, in gambling, in marketing, in sports, and in local government.

Planned engagement may actually become a source of legitimacy for professionalism if one is unwilling to accept the uncoordinated and almost ad hoc nature of contemporary governance—that "place" where currently some decisions are directed by our legislative and administrative institutions, some are connected, and others are wholly separate.

In the future, legitimacy for local government professionals likely will come from the ability to coordinate this "marketplace of governance" as they continue to develop the competencies that will help them bridge the increasingly complicated arenas of political acceptability and administrative feasibility. I believe that the anchor for that competence may well be found by committing to an enhanced role for citizen engagement in our communities. **PM**

[1]"Citizens Jury," Lewisham, United Kingdom, www.lewisham.gov.uk/CouncilAndDemocracy/HavingYourSay/CitizensJury/.

[2]David Chrislip, "Negotiating the Crossroads: Civic Engagement in the 21st Century" (unpublished manuscript, 2005), 3, www.colorado.edu/communication/comm3000002/NegotiatingtheCrossroads.pdf.

[3]See an earlier version of this argument in John and Carol Nalbandian, "Contemporary Challenges in Local Government," *Public Management* (December 2002).

[4]Advanced Strategy Center at Pinnacle Peak, Scottsdale, Arizona, www.advancedstrategycenter.com.

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