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Beyond Politics: Strategies to Achieve Community Goals
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Beyond Politics: Strategies to Achieve Community Goals

Effective management of community resources relies on considering economic vitality, ecological health and community quality of life. Too often, decisions are made which ultimately undermine a community's identity, resulting in losses and not gains towards community integrity. Managing common resources needs a decision making process that addresses the economic, ecological and social impacts we know occur when we do something.

First communities should decide by what measure decisions will be evaluated. In the political realm, the standard of measure will vary among individuals between self interest and common interests. The larger the gap between self interest and common interests the greater the political tension and controversy. At times this tension can be a source of creative inspiration but it also has the capacity to sideline discussions and muddy the issues to the detriment of achieving positive outcomes for the community.

A solution is to integrate a method for forming and describing a community vision that compiles all values held in common into the political process. A Community Vision Statement is a description of what citizens want their community to be and how it should be left for future generations. The vision statement should be comprehensive, linking future landscape descriptions with the resource base needed to maintain economic prosperity and desired quality of life.

Now, how do we evaluate decisions as a community, especially when the issues are controversial? Many considerations may cross our minds including best judgment based on experience and wisdom, peer feedback, expert opinion, and cost effectiveness. The problem is individuals evaluate decisions using different criteria that often vary between situations. Our biases can contribute to the undermining of community values and vision. Examples are when politicians focus on reducing costs without analyzing if the outcome will lead toward public goals or when decisions ignore long-term environmental consequences for short term economic gains.

A Common Process for Decision-making

To manage common resources, communities need citizens and leaders to begin operating from the same paradigm of decision-making. We can establish clear goals, expanding and clarifying our

vision statement as necessary. But we must also, as a community be responsible for asking the fundamentally important questions needed to ensure our decisions are socially, economically and environmentally sound. We need to know that decisions will produce and maintain the community we want to live in.

This can be accomplished by asking questions based on sound management principles, that are objective and focus on achieving a preferred outcome. Some important questions for evaluating community resources are to ask:

1. Is the proposal likely to move our resources and community toward or away from our Community Vision?
2. Is the proposal addressing the cause of a problem or just a symptom?
3. Does the proposal strengthen the weak link between where we are today versus where we want our community to be tomorrow? (This is because all resource expenditures should be to strengthen the next weakest link.)
4. Which of these proposals will give our community the biggest return for our expenditures toward our Community Vision?
5. Which proposal is most efficient in consumption of limited energy and dollar resources.
6. Will the proposal be supportive of society and culture?
7. Which alternative can contribute the most support toward fixed costs we already have.

These questions can be used by communities to evaluate the efficacy of proposed solutions for achieving the sense of place defined in their community vision.

The last element in this model of decision-making is to evaluate progress. All decisions affecting common resources should be monitored and when what we are doing isn't leading toward our goals, it is time to do something different.

The following analysis is an example of how these seven questions can be used to guide decision-making on common property resource issues. The subject used for the example is a couple of year old controversy about solid waste management in the island community of San Juan County in Washington State, USA. While some may not relate to solid waste as a common resource, garbage belongs to all of us and we are affected economically, ecologically and socially by its management. The situation provides an example of how thinking about all of society's concerns when making decisions can move communities beyond controversy to solutions.

The Community Vision

Through public process, citizens in San Juan County of Washington State wrote a statement of their Community Vision as part of a landuse planning process. It generally defines economic, social and environmental goals for the community. Assuming citizens are committed to the vision and intend to act in accordance then all decisions regarding common resources should be measured by whether the outcome will help achieve the community vision. For example, San Juan County's vision says they support and encourage traditional industries including forestry, farming, aquaculture, construction, fishing and tourism. To insure this, all community decisions that affect these industries would be evaluated based on whether, if implemented, they would likely contribute to continued economic viability for those livelihoods.

Parts of the San Juan County Vision Statement were extracted to produce a goal related to solid waste management for purposes of evaluating current proposals to the controversy. Based on these statements, the citizens of San Juan County want a solid waste management system that achieves the following results:

- Uses innovative approaches to managing waste materials and reducing public costs.
- Handles waste management locally as much as possible.
- Is service oriented, low in cost, reliable and efficient.
- Maximizes conservation and recycling opportunities.
- Prioritize reducing waste, recycling, energy recovery, waste separation, landfill, in that order.
- Provide year-round employment in solid waste management.
- Leaves the environment clean and the community healthy.

The Analysis Process

Rising costs and a large debt to payoff the closure of an old landfill were complicating existing solutions to solid waste in San Juan County, Washington. There were rallies for privatization of the local industry as a means to reducing costs. The key issue was concern over rising costs, mostly related to hauling charges. You see, the county is composed of islands and all waste is barged or trucked off the islands as existing landfills are full.

The County's waste disposal system is financed almost entirely by user fees of which 50% covers costs of long-haul disposal, 22% is debt service for an old landfill closure and 18% is used to fund free recycling services. Recycling is slightly more costly than long-hauling and land-filling. Some income is derived from sales of recycled materials but the cost of transport is typically greater than the value of the materials hauled. As a result the county is subsidizing recycling with fees generated from garbage disposed in County facilities. The County's recycling program has been highly acclaimed and won national attention.

A consultant was hired and reported minor cost savings from privatization unless the private contractor would be required to pay prevailing wages to its employees, in which case, there would not be any significant savings. Other savings of 3.5% in the recycling program and 6.1% in transfer station operations could be realized to drop the disposal fee about 10%.

The following cost reduction alternatives were investigated:

- Re-finance the land-fill closure debt, if current interest rates are low enough.
- Complete planned improvements to a baling facility that would bale recyclables and reduce the volume of materials.
- End free recycling.
- Eliminate recycling of higher cost materials.
- Privatize the system.
- Form a disposal district that could collect a sales tax on waste transactions to pay any deficit.
- Collect a property tax to cover deficits in solid waste management.

The paramount question is whether any of these proposals will contribute to achieving the community's vision of solid waste management?

Most proposed solutions suggest changes in the allocation of the solid waste *budget*. Refinancing, adding taxes or eliminating programs address the symptom of rising costs but ignore that *transportation* of waste and recyclables constitutes the single largest expense to County residents. Serious solutions must address the significant costs in order to be effective in the long term. Successful strategies for improving the solid waste management and recycling system would reduce the volume of material to be transported as well as reduce the system's dependency on expensive transportation solutions. Ignoring the principle of cause and effect will delay real solutions.

Of the solutions proposed, only one, completing the planned baling facility improvements, would improve loading efficiency and reduce transportation costs. None of the suggestions offered strategies for *minimizing the production of waste* though waste volume is clearly driving the public cost of the system.

The controversy over privatization is misdirected. A private operator will face the same constraints affecting the current public waste system: dependency on fossil fuels and long-haul transport which are the primary sources of escalating costs. While some expenses could no doubt be lowered, costs would not logically be much lower, than the current system, unless the private system was radically different than the current one. The point being that privatization cannot substantially reduce costs unless the system used is substantially less costly.

Applying resources to the weakest link is based on the concept that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Sometimes there are downright breaks in the chain. The proposals offered by County leaders were not well linked with the goals stated by the community. Some, such as eliminating recycling, run counter to the community's stated vision. *Further progress on the issue will need to focus first on getting clear goals established that are understood by citizens and public leaders.* Without a clear understanding of where citizens want to go, leadership will flounder. Furthermore, clear goals (remember, not how to do it but where do we want to go), will help citizens and leaders together evaluate proposals using the same criteria for judgment.

Cost issues are very important to consider. In a conventional cost benefit analysis, it would be cheaper and more profitable to the county in the short term to landfill all wastes and not collect recyclable materials. However that would conflict with community goals. By comparison, a cost benefit analysis should really focus on evaluating the relative value of different alternatives based on whether the outcomes will be closer to the community vision. All money and effort should be spent on solutions that best address the root cause or the weakest link. In this case one would ask, what alternative will give us the biggest bang for our buck toward the community vision of waste management. In this example, the baling facility improvements would reduce volumes thereby lowering the costs of transport so among the strategies proposed it would score high.

The current solid waste management system is heavily dependent on repeated inputs of limited energy sources because it relies on trucking waste off the island. None of the proposals seriously reduce dependency on increasingly expensive fossil fuels. To avoid the escalating costs associated with heavy use of finite resources, decisions should favor strategies that reduce consumption of non-renewable resources.

Proposals also should be evaluated for what they bring to a community in terms of how people feel about themselves and what they stand for. For example, a proposal to reduce waste volumes by banning certain kinds of packaging may pass all the other tests but not reflect a community's

common value about freedom or the way public affairs should be managed. Such a proposal could fail because it is not in alignment with a community's values. Similarly, a private waste disposal system may offer radically lower rates for citizens but not result in a solid waste system that meets environmental values.

All communities have expenses consistent with the services and infrastructure they provide. It is important to evaluate the relative contribution of different proposals toward meeting fixed expenses. Fixed expenses for solid waste are 22 percent of the budget and result from debt service for facilities, landfill closures, operations and administration. There may be innovative ways for new enterprises to contribute to some of these costs that are not addressed in the proposed solutions.

Proposals put forth so far are largely short-term solutions to the solid waste cost concerns of San Juan County citizens. The situation illustrates how a comprehensive analysis of economic, environmental and social impacts can guide communities towards decisions that achieve long term as well as short term goals. In this example the questions evaluate the contribution of the solutions to the common goal. They are used to identify the weaknesses in thinking, but can also be used to design a solid waste management system that meets community goals.

Common vision is the heart of community decision-making and evaluating decisions comprehensively is the brain. Imagine the power of a voter population that can consistently articulate these powerful questions of public policy and governance decisions. We can use these principles to effectively guide our leaders for the public good and to improve management of common resources. If we know where we are going as a community and are able to answer the key questions that will get us there, we can move beyond controversy to our community vision.

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