

WHY THE FEDERAL AND
REGIONAL INTEREST IN
PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT
IN WATER RESOURCES
DEVELOPMENT

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*FEDERAL AND REGIONAL INTEREST

IN PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Introduction

It should surprise few that public involvement has become so important to water resources planning. After all, in a world of increasing population and limited resources some democratic distribution of those resources is to be expected in the United States. In the past, American idealism has sought solutions to societal crises in the faith of more democracy. During the depression of the thirties, the New Deal called for "grass roots" democracy. When cities burnt in the sixties, the Great Society looked to neighborhood citizen participation. Mired in the thicket of sharpened environmental and alternative water use conflicts of the seventies, we again fall back on our idealism--the people should have a say.

At face value, such idealism can appear naive--even dangerous. Indeed, numerous commentators have pointed to the pitfalls of unchecked faith in the ideological cure of more democracy.¹ Consequences ranging from anarchy to totalitarian cooptation have been forecasted results of such unchecked faith. Even worse, public involvement might encourage short term political decisions contradicting contemporary scientific advice.

*The views and opinions presented do not represent official policy but are those of the author.

Despite the warnings, that faith lingers. And not without reason. For planners have come to create as much as predict our futures. Thus, "Who are these planners" and "Who are access to them" are questions critical to maintaining democratic accountability.

More than 100 existing public involvement programs are witness to the Federal government's vital interest in both the limits and potentials of public involvement. This paper addresses these limits and potentials by discussing how public involvement helps resolve five key planning questions:

1. Should experts or citizens decide alternatives?
2. Is planning administration or legislation?
3. How can the government know if it is effective?
4. How can we project impacts of plans?
5. How can we reconcile regional needs with realities of jurisdictional boundaries?

1. Should Experts or Citizens Decide Alternatives?

That society has become more complex and technology more sophisticated is well argued in literature. That this complexity and sophistication has encouraged debate over the rational strategies for maintaining and controlling societal change is clear. However, the debate over who has sufficient wisdom to "rationally" decide for society is far from new. In fact, it is a classic dialogue of Western Civilization.

In planning we often assume that all experts are citizens but not all citizens are experts. But is this really true? Certainly,

not all citizens possess the expertise for calculating the strength of concrete necessary for a bridge abutment. But do all concrete experts possess the expertise to determine whether that bridge should be built? Just who should decide the how, why and where of this bridge?

Democratic theory would find the answer in the collective wisdom of a body politic. Representative government would have us believe that such collective wisdom manifests itself through decisions of legitimately elected officials. But we all, from time to time, have questioned that "representativeness." So where does that leave us?

Some modern theorists calculate that most people do not want to participate.² In fact, too much participation, particularly in highly specific "technical" decisions, might encourage poor decisions. Others look to our mass communication technology for citizen opportunities to participate on more national issues.

But public involvement in planning is more than simply increasing the quantity of participation. It builds on a currently neglected but classical democratic faith. That is, the experience of participation at all levels of social activity makes good citizens.³ Good citizens create a good body politic which support good decisions.⁴ The dividing line between citizen and expert becomes amorphous, indeed less relevant.

The good citizen theme recurs throughout Western literature. Pericles passionately describes the strength of Athens as the good character of its participating citizens.⁵ In nineteenth century

Britain, John Stuart Mills finds representative government strong because it produces "active-self-helping" citizens.⁶ Robert Cole expands the theme of participating experience into industrial democracy.⁷

In current literature, planning as social learning is reflected in the "new humanistic" approaches to planning of Turner, Dunn, Schon and Freidman.⁸ Recent empirical planning studies by authors such as Gross and Benveniste show that the rational system of planning theory rarely fit the reality of the human conditions.⁹

Several years ago, Robert Merton pointed out that social planning is really social interaction.¹⁰ In other words, when you plan for society, you interact with that environment for which you are planning. The "stand-off" objectivity of planning becomes a false perception. Indeed, one of the most documented sources of social impacts in water resources planning is that the very length of planning time can dramatically affect communities.

Under a philosophy of public involvement, planning "with" replaces planning "for" in the planners vocabulary. Both theory and practice argued for this substitution. The government has a classical interest in our mutual education of good citizens. It has a practical interest in diffusing the illusion that citizen and expert somehow always differ.

However, the educative potential of public involvement also contains limits and pitfalls. For example, the language of education can easily slip into that of government propaganda. Also, if you believe in the strict expert-citizen dichotomy, education can

mean giving the citizen the facts. Public involvement than becomes a subtle cooptation effort.¹¹ Once all the objective facts are presented to citizens, the story will be clear and the solutions obvious. The government has both a deep interest and obligation to avoid wasting resources on such false efforts.

2. Is Planning Administration or Legislation?

Talking about blending citizens and experts is easy, doing it is difficult. Public policy decisions are made by people working in institutions. One of the tenets of democratic ideology is that our institutions provide citizens the opportunity to have a say in decisions which will affect them. Gradually, more important decisions affecting our lives seem to be made while carrying out activities we call planning. Government planning activities are generally housed in administrative bureaucratic agencies. Consequently, it is easy to see how planning can be viewed as an administrative problem. But is it?

For example, reducing the risk of flood damage obviously involves a set of "rationally" thought out steps. A situation can be objectively studied, a structure proposed, engineering specifications established, personnel requirements estimated, etc. Certainly these technical operations require administrative skill. But, is there a risk if potentially flooded farmers don't perceive one? Should a structure always be built? Could you propose an economical earth dam in a locality with a large cement industry? In short, does planning really assure public interest and social welfare?

This question has spawned numerous approaches to planning, each with different answers. For example, systems planning has evolved sophisticated economic cost-benefit calculations assumed to embody social welfare. Among others, operations researchers look to optimization criteria. However, as Kenneth Arrow eloquently suggests that searching for objective bases to value social welfare can be futile.¹² It is hard to imagine such bases existing independently from the political system. Indeed water resources policy observers continually point to the increased importance of social and cultural issues and increased politization of water resources management decisions.¹³

Expanding demands for valuable water could rapidly deteriorate into a Hobbesian nightmare of selfish maximization. Even the powerful utilitarian arguments that public interests can be realized in the market place summation of individual interests could break down. As we come to realize that planning creates as much as predicts our future--open resolution of resource use conflicts becomes more important. Social welfare functions are more clearly found in the acceptance of decisions of legitimate deliberative bodies than in "objective" economic calculations.

So what else is new--water resources development has always been political. This is true. However, the rules for making such decisions are changing.¹⁴

A northern congressman cannot easily vote for the "far-away" flood protection or navigation system. Constituents are now likely to be vitally interested. Shared values cut across time and geography.

Although that northern constituent may never see or use the facility, he (she) can have definite psychic participation stakes in its construction. In short, natural resources management policies are national issues complete with vocal, national, as well as local, constituencies.

Responding to changing rules, public involvement is encouraging the political systems to adapt to mixes of new issues, new values and new clients. But there are limits. Public involvement should not and cannot substitute for established political processes. It can and will increase conflict. It should not encourage planners to think of themselves as elected representatives. However, it could also help define new bases of consensus.

Given the high cost and potential increase in conflict--what is the government interest? Although public involvement requires heavy planning costs early in the decision making process, it can increase the probability of eventual consensus and implementation. Although public involvement will confront planners with problems they have no authority to solve, those with that authority will have to exercise their responsibility earlier in the decision process. Although public involvement might support a new professional class of elite bitchers, it also increases the risk to elected officials in avoiding issues. In short, public involvement will help force the elected political system to make political-legislative decisions now masquerading as administrative-planning decisions.

3. How Can the Government Know if it's Effective?

As planners, our plans should be useful, effective and doable. However, evaluating federal programs is difficult.¹⁵ Thinking about how planned projects affect a cross-section of society is also difficult. One useful analogy is to view the government as producing goods and services which are consumed by various publics.

A proposed consumer protection agency and required consumer protection plans give considerable importance to this analogy. In fact, consumer protection concepts have begun to blend with older public involvement experiences. Recently, over two hundred federal employees from eighty agencies recently met in Washington to discuss this mixture.¹⁶

The emergence of a service oriented society is a common theme in the futures literature.¹⁷ Such a society is likely to increase non-routine jobs and leisure time. New values will change emphasis on competing water uses. For example, recreation use demands on water are likely to increase with leisure time. New client-interest groups will make demands on operation and maintenance of existing fiscal plant as well as those being planned.

Increased operation and maintenance expense as a percentage of new construction is not simply a new spin-off of the projected service society. It is a recurring historical phenomena. In fact, operating and maintaining public works projects has often been observed as a critical factor in rise and fall of civilizations.¹⁸

Various cultural anthropologists, comparative historians and political scientists have found crucial links between the type of political/social system and the way societies organize to use water.¹⁹ As societies move from irrigation to navigation, population increases. Political organization expands and centralizes to allocate public works resources. However, ecological deterioration such as silting and sedimentation along with rising operation and maintenance costs diminish social willingness and ability to pay. As physical plant deteriorates, population shifts and the sociocultural systems decay.

What society maintains is a critical social choice. In this light, the planner is clearly a social change agent. However, since the implications are so vast we are all clients using physical plant as well as experts on what physical plant we need.

Public involvement offers one strategy to maintain the dynamic process of operating facilities in the face of changing public needs. It is one institutional mechanism by which government producers can gauge the effectiveness of their services and proposed plans.

Also, public involvement will force more continuity onto projects over time. Long lag times between planning and construction and operations can create the illusion of planning for one project, building another and operating a third. Once planning is done with serious public involvement, building and operating decision environments will change. Projects will have legacies of interest group and other involvement which cannot be avoided. Although actors and issues might change, the commitment to public interaction cannot be avoided. In this sense public involvement will help create a more integrated

rather than fragmented view of a project. Public involvement will become a valuable record of project history. In the Corps' case this will mean new synergy among planning, engineering, construction and operation departments.

Such continuation of commitment is vital to responsive public works. In being sensitive to changes over project history we planners will be in a better position to anticipate future public needs. While not perfect, it is a start in confronting a critical planning problem: What will future generations--the consumers of today's project--want and need?

Although the literature refers to the feedback and/or monitoring utility of public involvement, there are important limits. For example, how much freedom should be sacrificed to gain an equitable view of social needs? The government interest in monitoring social needs is good. But it should not become a license for citizen harassment.

4. How Can We Project Impacts of Plans?

Federal legislation and agency regulations are fraught with impact assessment terminology.²⁰ Holistic, interdisciplinary, cumulative and social effects assessment are common vocabulary in today's world of water resources planning. In part, this is a realization that public works projects are not simply distributive but redistributive public policies.²¹ As such, questions of justice and equity have renewed importance.

How do we know if a project costs and benefits unduly favor or

discriminate against groups? Legally, the concept of unduly revolves around some aspect of affected and interested parties claims.²² Impact assessment generally, and social impact assessment specifically, is replete with attempts to objectively define distributional impacts. However, unless we understand the perceptions of affected parties both our expectations of claims and our view of "unduly" are likely to be inaccurate.

Losses and gains of impacted parties will be perceived relative to other affected parties. It is not so much the absolute gain or loss as the perceived relative deprivation that is the key to projecting claims.²³ Even if a project demonstrates that each party gets more benefit than cost calculations than others. Not all will be gaining equally.

Public involvement can provide the planner with insight to perceptions of equal and/or non-equal gain or loss. Such insights will aid the planners continued working relationship with the community. It can also provide solid leads to effective and efficient mitigation of uneven distribution. For example, the T.V.A. produces a social monitoring report of ongoing construction at its Hartsville Power Project.²⁴ The Corps Seattle District is cost sharing classroom construction necessitated by construction-related impacts.²⁵ The North Dakota REAP monitoring program relies on local contact points for impact information supply.²⁶ In short, the qualitative public involvement insights are critical to the more objective impact assessment efforts. As such, public involvement can be used to do better social impact assessment.

5. How Can we Reconcile Regional Needs With Realities of Jurisdictional Boundaries?

Upstream-downstream controversies are the familiar starting points in illustrating conflicts in water resources development. Why should downstream residents pay for upstream pollution? Will an upstream channelization transfer a flood problem to downstream? How much water releases should the upstream city allow for downstream city in drought situations? Who will use the upstream impoundment for recreation? These and other such questions are familiar to water resources planners.

The national search for institutional solutions to be responsive to both regional needs and jurisdictional interests is not limited to the United States. In France, institutional arrangements incorporating user groups, representative citizens and water resources managers have developed to regionally set and collect pollution fees. Britain, also has reorganized water management supply along regional boundaries.²⁷

Internationally, the concept of mobilizing regionally defined constituencies into larger societal institutions capable of affecting resources allocation is at the heart of discussion on nation-building.²⁸ The concept of mobilizing cross-national impacted constituencies to simultaneously affect various national administrative and planning decisions is at the crux of the emerging trans-national

relations field.²⁹ Thinking that regionally defined functional needs will lead to development of regional institutions has deep intellectual roots. Nineteenth century functionalists clearly addressed this problem.³⁰ Adding public involvement to the argument recognizes that functional need can only lead institutional change, if it has firmly rooted citizen support.

The federal and state governments have attempted to institutionally deal with such problems through regional arrangements such as interstate compacts, federal-interstate commissions, inter-agency committees, ad-hoc coordinating committees, TVA, intra-state special districts and recent Title II, River Basin Commissions.³¹ From the 1808 Gallatin report through the Newlands Commissions, Roosevelt and Truman Committee to the Hoover Commission and Water Resources Council, coordination in water resources planning has been a recurrent theme.³² From nineteenth century multiple objective legislative through the Green Book, A-47, Senate Document 97, the Orange Book to Principles and Standards, the government has sought comprehensiveness in planning water resources development.³³

Continued interest in the parallel themes of comprehensiveness and coordination are symptoms of the increasing discontinuity between water resources social choice decisions and jurisdictional boundaries.³⁴ In this light, public involvement is often viewed as a way of mobilizing a regionally affected constituency which cuts across state, local and even international jurisdictional boundaries.³⁵ By offering new opportunities for interested parties to interact, public involvement will encourage a broader spectrum of costs to be articulated, a more

comprehensive trade-off analysis among alternatives, and increased regional plan acceptance by institutions and people within a region. Public involvement then becomes another strategy in the tradition of encouraging comprehensive and coordinated water resources planning.

Public involvement plays several roles in encouraging such synthesis. For example, public involvement can help sensitize regional plans to community impacts, thus helping close a difficult micro-macro gap in planning methods.³⁶ It will sensitize planners to special strategies and needs of locally impacted people and thus, suggest mitigation approaches. By bringing local volunteer and interest groups into a regional dialogue, overall citizen planner information exchange can be improved. Also, how specific trade-offs among various local interests affect regional planning goals will be subjected to more open debate.

Given resources and time constraints required, none of these outcomes will be accomplished without clearly defining public involvement goals. Much of the water resources literature as well as actual programs are vague about what public involvement should accomplish. Broadly speaking, regional public involvement can be viewed having data generating, evaluation and/or broad service oriented goals. Data generating goals refer to such activities as defining public perceptions of regional needs, issues and goals. Evaluation generally involves identification of alternative action; impact location, and potential social reaction. The public service goals of participation can include things such as representing the public, acting as a "surrogate"

public sounding board, aiding public acceptance of and consensus for a regional plan.³⁷

Numerous techniques are available and are being developed to accomplish these goals. They can be broadly classified in the following "categories" organizational, field work, simulation, expert paneling, survey work, base line data generation and legal-political. Organization techniques, among others, includes citizen advisory groups, technology assessment, monitoring systems, and ombudsmen. Field work include such techniques as participant observation, multiple field offices, workshops and demonstrations projects. Simulation includes gaming, role playing and mute court type techniques. Expert paneling refers to brainstorming, Delphi and policy-capturing techniques. Base line data generation can use election data returns, census, geocoding, secondary and primary survey analysis. Legal-political techniques involve such things as voting, referendums and campaign platforming.

Although the above typology offers one route to conceptualizing public involvement techniques, it illustrates an important point. Numerous public involvement goals and techniques are available to the regional planner. The critical problem for the planner is to match techniques to goals.

The Corps Sacramento District's San Pedro Creek study is a good example of how public involvement techniques can be molded into a strategy built on specified public involvement goals. Public workshops, a Citizen Advisory group, citizen information bulletin and feedback

questionnaire techniques were phased throughout the planning. The public involvement program actually generated new alternatives. It encouraged creative synthesis of these alternatives and produced a workable solution. This was done with relatively little expense and little sacrifice to planning time schedule.³⁸

Beyond technique, the type of decision will impact Public Involvement goals. In general, regulatory decision-making is primarily concerned with evaluating goals such as alternative identification, impact location and social reaction. Long term government planning, while concerned with evaluation, is more likely to be involved with the goals of data generation on regional needs, issues and goals. Short term implementation planning is likely to focus more on service goals such as plan acceptance and representation. Nevertheless, whatever typology is most useful, the critical point remains. For public involvement to help regional planning adjust to jurisdictional boundaries--form should follow function in designing a public involvement program.

CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps the preceding discussion can be summed up with the following thoughts. . .

1. Public involvement is not a technique but a strategy, approach or philosophy. There is no "one-way" to do public involvement. Avoid the technique looking for application syndrome. What works one place will not always work some place else. Anyway, it is not the technique as much as the people and their attitude who employ the technique that is important.

2. Public involvement does not substitute for the representative political process. In fact, it cannot be useful without complementing that process. However, public involvement will impact that political process.

3. No one public involvement program can claim to have "represented" the people. No planner should allow a public involvement program exclusive sovereignty over his (her) interpretation of the public will. However, it can be used to show competing views of that will.

4. Public involvement is not a panacea. More conflict will be generated, new time allocations and resource commitment will be required. But remember, it is not the question, "How much will public involvement cost?" but "Can we do anything at all without it?" that is more relevant.

5. Think of the positive contributions of public involvement-- How can it supplement and improve other technical efforts? How will

it make my decisions better?

6. Once started, be honest. Public involvement based on false assumptions and expectation of clever cooptation will be disastrous. Whether your efforts are honest can only be judged by you and your participants.

7. The goals of your public involvement program and the roles of participants must be clearly defined.

8. Be prepared to accept and implement decisions of participants. Just be clear on what types of decisions both you and participants in the public involvement program should be making.

FOOTNOTES

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