



Planning with the Public

Government officials are not elected to impose their will on others. Instead, local officials gain legitimacy because citizens of the community have elected them, believing that they will represent their interests.

Government is a vehicle which facilitates our pursuit of individual self-interests when we respect the interests of others and cooperate with others to promote our collective interests and the common good.

Planning with the Public

Local officials maintain legitimacy to the extent that they:

- maintain open, honest lines of communication;
- provide opportunities for citizens with diverse viewpoints to be heard;
- work with the community to develop a shared vision and agreed upon goals;
- and then follow these goals.

As long as they follow those goals, which represent the will of the people, they maintain the right to make decisions for the community.

Planning with the Public

Local Officials must:

- Help citizens recognize common values and help develop the commitment to each other's welfare that is necessary for a community to be a community;
- Help citizens understand the connection between their own self interest and what is good for the community as a whole;
- Provide suitable vehicles for staying in touch with and involving citizens.

It is not enough to ask whether government is providing good service. Instead, we must ask ourselves whether government is advancing democracy by serving as a catalyst to bring resources, people, and plans together to accomplish common goals.

“Meaningful democratic participation requires that the voices of citizens in politics be clear, loud, and equal: clear so that officials know what citizens want and need, loud so that officials have an incentive to pay attention to what they hear, and equal so that the democratic ideal of equal responsiveness to the preferences and interests of all is not violated.”

Sydney Verba in *Voice and Equality*

If government tries to do too much, it often strips away the motivation people have to be engaged in their communities. It does too little, citizens often do not have the resources or access to information to tackle their problems. But when government provides help in a way that stimulates and reinforces self-governance, then it truly works well.

Planning with the Public

Citizens engage themselves in their communities when they truly have a stake in the future of an area and know that their actions matter.

Community assets or community capacity tends to promote what the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau called “active, rather than passive, citizens.” A passive citizen, he said, is a member of the State. An active citizen is a participant in a city or republic. Our goal then, should be to find ways to encourage each other to assume greater shares of active, or responsible, citizenship.

Why Civic Engagement?



Legally required methods of public participation in government decision making in the US – public hearings, review and comment procedures in particular – don't work.

Today we are trapped in seeing public participation as involving citizens on the one hand, and government on the other. This simplistic duality underlies the debates and encourages adversarial participation.

Planning with the Public

It is the process which purifies, not the “influence” of the perfect on the imperfect.

Paul Skidmore and John Craig in their paper on the connection between public service and active citizenship have noted that citizens can and will participate if they see that their efforts make a real and positive difference.

“Good deliberation...accommodates itself to the shape that it finds, responsively and with respect for complexity...A doctor whose only resource, confronted with a new configuration of symptoms, was to turn to the textbook would be a poor doctor; a pilot who steered the ship by rule in a storm of unanticipated direction or intensity would be incompetent.”

Martha Nussbaum

Planning with the Public

Participatory planning processes can promote deliberation, not just mirror public wishes...such processes can enable participants not only to bargain and trade resources, but to learn and grow as citizens. They can learn about the “Other” – about their common destiny, about false suspicions and false promises, and about their new options for strengthened relationships and common action.

It is the process which purifies, not the “influence” of the perfect on the imperfect.

“I know of no safe repository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.”

Thomas Jefferson