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Rebuilding civic muscle

If we imagine that a primary function of government at any level is tool provider and catalyst, the definition of citizenship changes and the relationship between government and citizens is transformed. "Catalyst" conveys the possibilities of government's role as generator of civic energy and a tool in the creation of civic muscle. Literally, catalyst means an agent that initiates or speeds up a chemical reaction without itself being used up in the process.

Americans draw from a wellspring of creative energy and commitment to building a thriving nation and personally satisfying life. This derives from the understanding that a democracy is more than its formal structures and citizenship is more than voting. Democracy is dynamic. It must be continually shaped and reshaped. Democracy depends upon face-to-face interaction in everyday activities. Government and other institutions and groups thus become instruments for people to shape their common lives. It catalyzes action and provides an array of tools and resources for public work. It cultivates civic practices and helps to develop the civic muscle of citizens.

Only as we expand the meaning of citizen effort to include the creative, many-sided tasks of public work can the debate about devolution from federal to state and local governments and community institutions move away from the dead-end argument about who gets what, when and how. This reframing of citizenship moves people from spectators to the realization that we all create the nation. What we build and create, we can also reform and renew. ■

Harry C. Boyte is co-author of *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work*, and co-director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the Humphrey Institute. Nancy N. Kari is co-author of *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work*, and associate professor at the College of St. Catherine. For more information on the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, call (612) 625-1042.

Support from governments for community building

JOHN P. KRETZMANN
JOHN L. MCKNIGHT

Governments at all levels aspire to assist in the community development process. They are clearly the trustees of many resources that can be vital to neighborhoods involved in regenerating themselves from the inside out. However, these resources are often provided in ways that dominate, stifle and often misdirect local efforts to revive community life. This is because governments (and other funders) often see themselves as the central actor in the process of local community building.

Effective support of asset-based development requires governments to shift their role from defining problems and creating solutions to following community definitions and investing in community solutions. This shift will result in government leaders fulfilling their legitimate role of public servants. And as the effective role of a public servant is discovered, we will be reinventing government.

Local government invests in the community

Local governments can helpfully invest their resources in three important neighborhood assets and processes: citizen problem-solving, community plans and local economies.

1 Local government and citizen problem-solving

Across America, successful problem-solving involving the identification and mobilization of the skills and capacities of local citizens has led to the beginning of processes which reinvigorate the economic and physical assets that surround them. A first step in investing in this process is to reinvent government programs and personnel so that they are able to support local people in identifying and mobilizing their local assets. This means that rather than asking citizens for "needs surveys" and "problem inventories," local government can identify local problem solvers and the types of local assets described in this article. Then, the appropriate development question can be asked: how can

"Secure, wise, just and healthy communities are created by citizens and associations and their enterprises, supported by governments making useful investments in local assets."

these problem solvers be supported and the assets strengthened and connected? There are many examples where local governments have been useful supporters of local citizen problem solving.

The essential focus of this support have been representatives of local government who have asked how they can assist local citizens in their development efforts rather than how local citizens can participate in the government's efforts. When local civil servants are supporting citizen efforts, they will then be able to interpret to

their supervisors and elected officials how resources can serve rather than stifle.

A useful first step in reinventing local government involves frontline personnel creating an asset map of a local neighborhood. Shared with local association leaders, this map can be the beginning of a local discussion about the appropriate supportive role of government resources.

2 Local government and community planning

Increasingly, neighborhood leaders are forming local coalitions and

collective associations to multiply their capacity to regenerate their communities from the inside out. The focus of these groups varies. Some are general neighborhood advocacy organizations. Others focus on development activities related to housing, education, health, economic development, etc. Some have created broad-based community development groups that attempt to mobilize the assets of the entire community.

These new forms of neighborhood capacity building "tables" where people representing local assets sit, create a

Precautions for all governments

✓ **"Public servant" is the best definition of a government worker or program.** A servant supports and does not control. A servant never suggests that the employer could "participate" in the servant's work. The servant "supports" the employer's work.

✓ **Be clear about the limits of government.** If government replaces the work of citizens and their associations, it will not have created a good society. Instead, the evidence is clear that it will have created a dependent society. And because it will not be able to fulfill all its claims, local problems will grow worse. There can never be enough schools to create effective young people. There can never be enough clinics to create health. Secure, wise, just and healthy communities are created by citizens and associations and their enterprises, supported by governments making useful investments in local assets.

✓ **Leave the credit to local citizens and their associations and enterprises.** Too often, governments that have been a part of a local development effort take most of the public credit for the activity, overshadowing the efforts of local citizens and their community. The mayor cuts the ribbon. The governor announces the grant. Those who do the work go unrecognized.

✓ **Don't replace local associations and institutions with new systems, institutions, centers or agencies.**

Once one of the most significant causes of weakened local citizen initiatives, association work and institutional capacity, has been the introduction of new government-sponsored structures and organizations. As new organizations appear in the neighborhood with impressive buildings or offices, lots of money, and well-paid outside professionals, they unintentionally but necessarily replace some of the power, authority and legitimacy of local groups. Although they assert that they are there to strengthen community, they are as likely to replace community initiatives. Therefore, government representa-

tives can ask, "What do you community folks think we should do to support you?" rather than, "We have this new program that we're bringing into your community."

✓ **One size doesn't fit all at the neighborhood level.** The essential characteristics of local association life are diversity, proliferation and informality. Higher levels of government, on the other hand, are characterized by uniformity, standardization and formality, seeking to establish general guidelines and regulations that will "fit all." It is this generalizing imperative of central government that is structurally at odds with creative local initiatives. And yet, it is creative local initiatives that are the essential power for regenerating community. Therefore, great flexibility is necessary if large governments are to support community building. And if this flexibility is not possible, it may be best for large governments to learn how to get out of the way of local efforts. ■

Iron Range Youth for Action adds youth voice to government



SUE STEVENS

In 1989, the St. Louis County Board of Commissioners established the PARTNERS Board to recognize the needs of children and youth, and to further organizational collaboration and community efforts on behalf of youth. Elected officials from different levels of local government throughout northern St. Louis County serve on the Board and crafted the four goals that focus the group's future efforts.

PARTNERS goals:

1. To make recommendations to decision-makers regarding youth issues.
2. To improve coordination among youth agencies and be a catalyst for cooperative programming efforts.
3. To contribute to the public awareness of youth needs and issues.
4. To promote the involvement of youth in decision-making and leadership roles.

Iron Range Youth for Action

In the winter of 1995, PARTNERS initiated and sponsored its youth counterpart—Iron Range Youth for Action (IRYA). PARTNERS and IRYA worked to design a method so youth could have a greater voice in government, participate effectively in leadership roles in our communities, and increase public awareness of youth issues. IRYA members come from 12 different cities that stretch across northern St. Louis County including Aurora, Biwabik, Chisholm, Ely, Eveleth, Fayal, Gilbert, Hibbing, Hoyt Lakes, McDavitt, Mt. Iron and Virginia.

This past spring, IRYA held a Young Leaders Convention in Eveleth, Minnesota that 150 youth from 12 high schools representing eight school districts attended. Prior to the convention, IRYA members conducted a survey of over 1,600 youth to determine discussion topics, create a mission statement and draft a resolution supporting the IRYA mission statement.

IRYA mission statement:

"We, the youth of northern St. Louis County, want to share our ideas with decision-makers. We want to have more of a voice in government, be involved with the decision-making process, and participate effectively in making changes. The goal of Iron Range Youth for Action is to teach respectful ways for youth to become involved, to show their feelings, to state their opinions, and to take stands so that all sides of a problem or an issue can be heard and recognized. We would like to make our communities better places by creating a hand-in-hand relationship between youth and adults."

Iron Range Youth for Action members are currently presenting the IRYA resolution to elected officials and interested parties across northern St. Louis County. It is hoped that new partnerships between youth and adults will subsequently be created. ■

Reprinted with permission from PARTNERS—Local Governments with Youth. For more information on PARTNERS and IRYA, contact Sue Stevens, Community Program Specialist, at (218) 749-7114.

local vision, and work out the interrelationships necessary to implement their plans.

Local governments need to identify these tables and seek permission to sit as a participant. In this way, the concept of citizen participation in government can be transformed to government participation in citizen initiatives.

Once seated at these tables, public servants will understand how government resources can invest in the asset development strategies of local communities. This inventing generally takes four forms: money, information, technical assistance and public authority.

While local governments are accustomed to understanding funding, information and technical assistance as resources directed toward local use, public authority is usually understood as the exclusive domain of government. However, as neighborhoods create new structures for rebuilding community, they are now finding that they need to command some of the powers and authority held by municipal governments.

3 Local government building local economies

It is very clear that investments by government are an important part of many local economies. These investments take many forms. They may be federal defense contractors hiring local people, state highway programs which hire local contractors, or city schools contracting for food services from local caterers hiring neighborhood residents. Wherever government spends the taxpayers' money, it is investing in an economy. The critical question for local neighborhoods is whether the government is investing in its local economy.

Unfortunately, in lower-income communities, what often appears to be substantial local government expenditures are actually not investments in the local economy. This is because the expenditures largely go for health and

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human services. The government expenditures for medical services are received by professionals who usually reside outside the neighborhood, and companies servicing the medical personnel that are also non-local. The same is generally true of other educational and social services. The service providers and the companies that support them are usually outside the neighborhood. This is the reason the local government ledgers that appear to show considerable investment in lower-income neighborhoods are misleading. The government is investing in services for the neighborhood but not in the neighborhood economy.

Therefore, the reorientation necessary by local governments requires a new ledger. This ledger is a balance sheet that shows who received the local public expenditures as well as who received the services. It will show what percentage of local government dollars spent on behalf of neighborhoods resulted in the employment of local residents, purchases from local enterprises and contracts with local businesses.

When the balance sheet shows that most public expenditures are invested in the local economy, the need for social welfare expenditures will decrease as the economic well-being of local residents increases.

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For more information on community involvement . . .

Foundation for Community Encouragement

109 Danbury Road, Suite 8
Ridgefield, CT 06877
(203) 431-9483
Fax: (203) 431-9349

National Association of Community Action Agencies (NACAA)

1826 18th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20009
(202) 265-7546
Fax: (202) 265-8850

National Association of Neighborhoods (NAN)

1651 Fuller, NW
Washington, DC 20009
(202) 332-7766
Fax: (202) 332-2314

National Community Action Foundation (NCAF)

2100 M Street NW, Suite 604
Washington, DC 20037
(202) 775-0223
Fax: (202) 775-0225

National Community Development Association (NCDA)

522 21st Street NW, Suite 120
Washington, DC 20006
(202) 293-7587
Fax: (202) 887-5546

National Neighborhood Coalition (NNC)

810 First Street NW, Third Floor
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 289-1551
Fax: (202) 289-8173

Partners for Livable Places (PLP)

1429 21st Street, NW
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 887-5990
Fax: (202) 466-4845

Program for Community Problem Solving (PCPS)

915 15th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 783-2961

On-line resources . . .

Alliance for Redesigning Government (www.clearlake.ibm.com/Alliance/)

Mission of the organization is to generate a more effective system of governance. On-line database contains abstracts of case studies and concept papers on reinventing government.

American News Service (<http://americannews.com/>)

A news service started by the Center for Living Democracy to provide leads and stories for the media. Written by professional journalists, the stories describe initiatives that are reshaping American institutions from the bottom up.

Civic Practices Journal (www.cpn.org)

An on-line journal that brings together innovators and educators across America to share the tools, stories and best practices of community empowerment and civic renewal.