

DECIDING ON DIALOGUE OPTIONS

by Sarah Read and Dave Overfelt

This is part three of a three part series of articles; Part I and Part II were published in the November 2010 and January 2011 issues of The Review. In our previous articles, we offered a description of dialogue and its value for municipal governance and described resources that can help you manage different dialogue processes. In this article, we will work through a hypothetical planning process to better illustrate the choices involved in deciding when and how to work with dialogue processes.

Our story begins with John, the city manager of a mid-sized city. This city has been experiencing a great deal of conflict over proposals to replace existing infrastructure and to build new infrastructure related to proposed development. Even projects that appear to be great for the community, like strengthening sewer systems, draw opposition related to funding, timing, and use of land. For some time, John has been considering initiating a dialogue process to proactively address these conflicts by engaging his community in making their own plans for the future. In order to start this process, John calls a consultant and facilitator he met at a conference, whom we will call Pat.

"Hello Pat, this is John, city manager for Townsville, Mo. We have recently been facing a great deal of opposition to proposals to improve our physical infrastructure, and also to siting of industrial buildings in our community. Things are getting more heated, with name calling and raised voices at some meetings. The different groups seem to just get further and further apart. It doesn't really seem to matter what kind of infrastructure we



are talking about or where it is located. It could even be something that could help bring a significant number of jobs to the community and someone will still show up to the city council hearings and cause problems. With so many people showing up to complain, the City Council has repeatedly delayed or even shut down projects, and they are also reluctant to look at revising some of our regulations that really need updating. Yet when I'm out in the community many people talk to me about wanting to solve these issues and move forward. I think the groups involved in the visible conflicts are relatively small. I have been hearing a lot about the benefits of community dialogue and thought I would give you a call and get your thoughts about starting some sort of dialogue in our community. What do you think?"

"Well John, I'm always glad to talk about public engagement. One thing to think about is your community's readiness for dialogue and where to start. Not all communities are quite prepared to jump into the difficult discussions that they will need to solve the issues you describe. Sometimes it's best to start with informational dialogues that build interest and skills, as well as providing the background information that will build a better understanding of the issues and create a foundation

for future dialogues. In this instance, I hear you saying that there is a great deal of conflict in your community. So one question you will need to answer is how to provide a forum that will help build a more collaborative mindset, cool the heat, and not give too much opportunity for partisan gamesmanship. Also you need to be very clear about your goal and purpose in this initial stage. You don't want to promise

more than you can deliver, and you want to have some boundaries so you can stop and assess how things are going without anyone accusing you of not respecting the public. Being clear about purpose, goals and steps in the process - even if it's saying something like 'we will start here, stop and evaluate, and then decide with you on the next step,' helps build trust in the long run."

"Thanks Pat. I had heard about some community-wide visioning processes at a conference and wasn't sure if that would work for us or not. I think not, at least not right now. We do need to start small, and the council will want to know what we are doing, why, and how it will affect them. Do you have any thoughts you can share on what we might do?"

"When high conflict is the norm," Pat said, "we often advise communities to start with a simple dialogue process that is designed primarily to *inform* the public. In this type of process, you provide information and invite the public to become more involved by sharing questions and comments. You could for example, hold an informational meeting during which your staff presents and requests feedback either on various options for the future or on a set of criteria to be considered as a guide for future decisions. You could also offer a survey and provide additional opportunities

for public comment by including an online summary of the meeting and an optional survey for those who could not make the meeting. If you do this, you can also offer another informational session on the results of the survey and request further feedback at that time. By focusing on the dissemination of information, you send the message that you have something for citizens to learn about. By inviting comment, you show that you also are open to learning more about the community's values and concerns. By reporting back and inviting further input you are beginning to collaborate. By framing the overall process as a learning experience, you can work toward developing a common ground between city and community and between community groups in conflict. Again, you want to be clear about how exactly you intend to gather feedback from community members, how you will keep the public informed throughout the process, and exactly how you intend to integrate this feedback into your planning process. By clearly articulating these steps and then following through on your promises, you are working to build both trust and the capacity for more deliberative dialogues in your community in the future. Does this make sense John?"

"It sure does, Pat, and I appreciate the time. We will try some of this out, and I would also like to talk to you about what you might charge to review some of our initial drafts and be available to answer questions from our staff."

FROM INFORMATION TO INVOLVEMENT

John took his consultant's advice and held an informational meeting in a public setting. During this meeting participants were given handouts that provided a brief history and some data related to the community's infrastructure, outlined the key themes of the session, presented open-ended questions on key issues, and invited feedback. All of the meeting materials were placed in a prominent place on the City's Web site, and residents were also offered an opportunity to complete an electronic survey. Staff promised a written summary within one month and a follow-up meeting within two. For the first time in a long time, staff received thoughtful comments and good ideas from concerned citizens. Several citizens also expressed appreciation for the overview and information, and liked the low-key format of both the initial and follow-up



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public meetings. Six months out from this first information-based dialogue effort, there is still some conflict in Townsville, but it is less heated. There is also much greater understanding of the community's infrastructure needs, more people are involved, and better patterns of communication have begun to emerge. With all of this, John calls back his consultant to discuss whether or not it is time to begin a full-scale citizen engagement process.

"Hello Pat, this is John from Townsville again. As you know, after we last talked we held several informational meetings and gathered some really great comments that we used to help shape our current plans for infrastructure development. I think the members of the community who came to the meetings left with a better understanding of the context in which we have to make decisions. The council has also been pleased with some of the feedback they got from the process. We have started to build some good relationships with different parts of our community, and I wanted to check in with you to see what you think about starting to more actively engage our community in planning for these projects and revising our regulations before we put some specifics around some of our upcoming projects. I'm still thinking that a "visioning process" might really help in the long run, although again, I'm not really sure if we're ready."

"Well John, it sounds like things have gotten off to a good start although you're right that you still have a way to go until your community members are really prepared for a full-scale collaborative or deliberative process. At this point, you want to reinforce the relationships and skills that you have begun to build. You already have in place some good processes for keeping the community informed and obtaining feedback. You could now add some workshops and other processes that allow for greater involvement and help you identify more of the community's values, interests, hopes and concerns that underlie some of the conflict around these issues. There are some open and fun processes like the Question Formulation Technique from the Right Question Project, the World Café, or the Conversation Café models that can engage the public in imaginative ways while also giving you some very good data on these types of issues. In each of these different processes, a set of materials is prepared ahead of time and these materials provide instructions for facilitators and items to be discussed. Participants are focused on a specific issue or set of issues and asked to brainstorm ideas, solutions or questions. By focusing participants on the generation of ideas and questions, you can minimize conflict since the creativity and structure of these sessions discourage oppositional position-taking. You could also begin some polling of how the public feels about various options

QUESTIONS TO ASK AT THE OUTSET

John is asking himself a series of questions to determine the best way to move forward.

What are the community's top priorities? What are the key issues?

What are the community's strengths and weaknesses?

What are the community's values? What are the community's goals?

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FROM INVOLVEMENT TO ACTIVE, ONGOING COLLABORATION

After implementing a survey asking community members to rate priorities and options on various issues and hosting two productive question-and-idea generating dialogue sessions, John is feeling good about starting a full-scale engagement process for his community and calls Pat once more.

"Hello Pat, after our last set of public meetings I feel like we helped people both to think through the issues the community faces, and to really lay the foundation for an engaged community. We have much less conflict over these issues and, in fact, some of the conflict that arises easily sorts itself out as community members educate each other, and help to moderate the comments of other members of the community. People have a better sense of the trade-offs and we have identified some of the key drivers of the conflicts that occur. One of those is our regulatory structure which I've wanted to fix for some time. I was thinking that we might be ready for a full-scale community visioning process, and I wanted to check in to see what you think."

"John, I am really happy to hear that things have been going well and it sounds like your community is prepared to become a partner in the actual decision-making process on these projects. One thing to think about is whether you really want a visioning process or whether you simply want deeper engagement on the issues of infrastructure and development that have been the focus of your dialogues to date. You also will need to distinguish between *collaboration* and *empowerment*. What I mean by that, is whether you want the public to come up with recommended solutions on issues or whether they will have final decision-making power as to what solution will be implemented. Members of the public can quickly become angry if they think they were invited to make a decision and then new options and information are also considered. That kind of dynamic could undermine all of your hard work to date."

"I can tell you Pat that we would definitely be looking at collaboration - some of the councilmembers have already questioned whether we are empowering the public too much! They will definitely want to make the decisions and that is what they are, of course, elected to do."

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"I certainly understand that John, and again the key is to be very clear on the purpose of the process, how it will be integrated with other decision-making processes and boundaries. Another thing to think about when structuring a full engagement process is leadership. Since you are looking for collaborative input, it is a good idea to have a diverse group of community leaders who are well-respected, good listeners, and willing to put in the time and energy to help shepherd the process. Once initiated, some internal leadership for the process should be drawn from the participants themselves. If you have different discussion groups, consider having a participant from each group volunteer to serve as a facilitator and liaison to the leadership group. This can create a greater sense of connection between the leadership group and those who participate. As in all other stages of building community engagement, you must specifically outline how you will keep your community informed and what you will do with the input. There also needs to be ongoing ways to engage new participants and bring them up to speed."

After talking through a number of other factors with Pat, John decided to focus on both designing an ongoing

participatory process to actively engage citizens in helping to find solutions for the infrastructure and development challenges faced by the community, and instituting a quarterly "round table" of community leaders who would review and discuss trends. Summaries of these discussions would be published in the local paper and on the City's Web site, and linked to an online portal for comments and suggestions. Pat was invited to help with the design of both.

As the above dialogue illustrates, there are many factors to consider in planning a community dialogue. In deciding where to start, you need to consider community readiness, which includes an assessment of the community's past experience, existing level of conflict, and expectations for engagement. "Equip, engage, and empower" are words that represent different points on a continuum. It is hard to do all three at once, and empowering citizens before they are equipped with the information and skills needed for productive engagement can increase rather than ease tensions between citizens and their representatives in government. It is possible over time, however, to build a culture of cooperation through careful planning and the integrated use of a range of dialogue processes that

are designed to meet the needs of different community segments. You can download a set of planning guidelines, and also find more resources for public engagement, at www.buildingdialogue.wordpress.com. □

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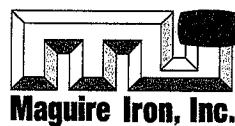
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