COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN MANAGEMENT PLANNING: SHADOW OR SUBSTANCE?

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BACKGROUND

Today the community is increasingly rejecting the notion of professional planners as exalted wizards. In turn, thankfully, managers are facing up to the fact that it is they who are responsible for management of community resources and it is they who should be responsible for ensuring that their development, use or conservation is responsibly planned. Other papers in this workshop outline the kind of role managers might play in the management planning process.

The task of this paper is to discuss the role the community might play. We hope to be somewhat provocative with thoughts that may seem unconventional, and to play devil's advocate with some notions that we firmly believe managers need to come to grips with before entering upon a management planning process.

The views in this paper are those of the authors, and are not necessarily those of the ACT Parks and Conservation Service.

THE THEORY

First, it is vital that we are all clear about what it is that we, as parks and recreation managers, are producing or offering. Some may feel their role in life is to develop better parks and that management planning might in some way help that. But does this mean better maintained parks, more aesthetic design, more facilities? Is it really the pursuit of material or visual values that guides our work? Or can we perceive a higher purpose?

We sometimes use notions relating to the 'Garden City' concept to encapsulate our aims without looking past the aesthetic side of that concept to the deep social values which underpin it. This includes values such as landscapes and settings that foster :-

- sustainability (that are affordable in the long term in both an economic and environmental sense)

- equity (that are accessible and freely available to all people and groups)

- diversity (that are varied enough to meet the diverse needs of people in the community).

So a rather safe sounding, seemingly aesthetic-based concept begins to sound like an agglomerate of green politics, social justice strategies and the new public health movement. This shouldn't surprise us - these are all social movements that really are about the same thing: quality of life in a fairer society. We believe that is the social mission into which we fit.

Our primary role is actually one of satisfying human needs; our development and use of parks and recreation resources and facilities is more a *means* to this than an *end* in itself.

If this is so, how is our success to be measured? By emerald green turf of the right height and cut? By the bottom line of the landscape development balance sheet showing seven figures? Do these really indicate that we have met a social need? Surely our social mission needs to be measured in terms of social values. What sort of contribution do we make if we direct more finances to promoting the health of turf than to promoting the health of people?

Similarly, do we measure success by counting the number of people who come and use our areas or facilities? Or should we be finding out why the remainder of the community do not? Shouldn't we be measuring our success by the changes we can make to their perception of the choices available to them and to their ability to act on them?

Cynics will deride these views as: 'fine in theory but can't work in practice'. But what is inescapable is that there are three partners to decision-making in our field or any other arm of resource management. These are 'Politicians', the 'Community' and 'Government employees'.

At all levels of government, pragmatism dictates that scarce resources will go to the most socially attractive or politically attractive area. In this context our role might well be seen as part of establishing and keeping open the communication links between politicians, the community and the management organisation. The organisation's survival and success in tough times may well depend on the extent to which we can gain community support for our objectives, policies and priorities. Certainly along the way we will be told that our task is to serve the government of the day. Our challenge will be to align what our organisation wants or needs with what the rest of the community (the voters) want or need.

SOME BASIC CONCEPTS

Whatever flirtations we may have had with semblances of community input in the past, we need to start by examining a number of concepts :-

Whose product or process?

In any planning exercise we are dealing with an eternal triangle of 'values', 'resources' and 'facilities' (the last of which we take to include 'programs'). Our objectives, priorities and practices need to be constantly tested by asking: 'whose values? whose resources? whose facilities?' Our public parks and facilities are clearly community facilities and resources, funded from community funds by governments guided by someone's representation of at least part of the community's needs.

So when we embark on a management planning exercise we need to ask 'whose process?' Is it to be a process that supports some predetermined decision or outcome that we feel the community (or a selected part of it) should embrace - that is, our process? Or is it to be a process by which we make ourselves open to the expectations and aspirations of the diverse elements of our community in a genuine attempt to meet social needs - that is, the community's process?

So often we hear it said: 'after all that consultation, we've got pretty much what we started with, so obviously we had it right, but we had to go through the motions'. As long as we concentrate on products alone we will always have this as a result, and deep down this is probably the result we've often been after. It re-inforces our prowess as managers, technicians and professionals - who knows better than we what is needed?

It is time to challenge this anachronistic notion of our 'divine right', and to emphasise the value of the process over that of the product. One of the many things the social movements mentioned earlier have in common is the notion of empowerment of the community and the individual. This involves redressing of imbalances, demystification of systems and institutions, recognition of differing values and the active fostering of self-help, personal growth and creativity. Meaningful community participation in decision-making is a means to these ends. Our role is to serve the whole community by facilitating such a process.

Input, involvement, consultation or participation?

'Input', 'involvement' and 'consultation' are most inadequate notions, implying a one-way flow, and to what end? Certainly these lead to a product which may be somewhat different from that which we would have produced in isolation. But they contribute very little to processes of community or individual empowerment.

To help understand the difference between these and participation let's examine a simple model of participation in decision-making (figure 1).

Figure 1. A simple model of participation in decision making.

Professional
administration

Reactive ⟵ ─────────┼─────────⟶ Creative

Participative
democracy
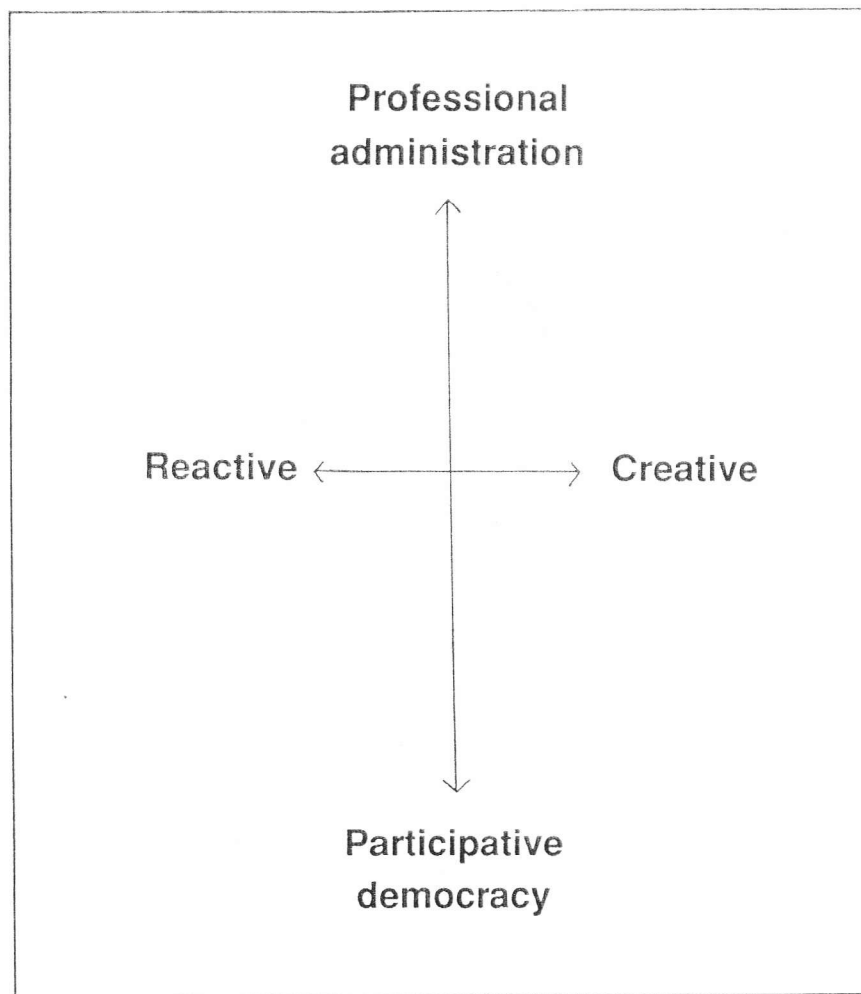
On a vertical axis we can draw a 'decision-making' process with the extremes dictated by who gets to make the final decision. At the upper end we have the so-called 'professional administration' whereby decisions rest with technicians and bureaucrats, on the lower the 'participatory democracy' ideal whereby the community have a direct say in the decisions. These are summarised as 'rule by experts' and 'planning with people'.

On a horizontal axis we can draw the two basic forms of participation, summarised on the left as 'reactive', in which people react to proposals prepared and submitted by experts, and on the right 'creative', in which people are actively involved in formulating the proposals.

By combining the two axes we can develop a quadrant model within which we can characterise planning exercises. This model can assist both managers and other people in the community to discuss and reach agreement on what form of participation they want or need to achieve their aims - not only for *product* but also for *process*.

While justifiably proud of some of our management planning efforts to date, it is clear that both planning and management authorities in the ACT have been focused in the upper left quadrant where participation is reactive to plans prepared by the organisation, and final decision-making rests with the organisation. It should be pointed out that the organisation for which the authors work has survived recent excursions into the upper right and lower left quadrants, with increased (albeit selective) community involvement. No-one seems to have yet ventured into the lower right quadrant - one may well ask 'why not?'.

Responsibility and Freedom

Democratic systems of government claim to foster increased personal freedom in contrast to the control exerted by totalitarian or socialist states. Most of us would accept that as agents of a democratic government we have a role to play in fostering this increased freedom.

Planning with people offers freedom to those people to work within a system they may well have come to mistrust and attack. Greater freedom leads to greater self-worth, as well as greater pride and interest in the community.

We should not be seduced by self-interested and paternalistic arguments such as 'people are just not ready for increased freedom and will only abuse it', for naturally on this line it is best to withhold freedom and go on making decisions for people. Rather, as Kropotkin argues, the only cure for an abuse of freedom is more freedom. People need to have freedom before they are 'ready' for it so that they can learn to use it, explore it and grow in it.

It seems that the price we are expected to pay for some of our increased freedom is the acceptance of greater personal responsibility for the state of our environment, our welfare and our future. I would contend that we have just as great a role to play in this regard. Participation in planning is a means of overcoming apathy or other barriers and accepting responsibility for affecting outcomes.

We have a role in educating both our staff and the community to accept responsibility and to participate. But before we get carried away with our role as 'teacher', we need to realise that this is not education about turf, tree surgery, irrigation or wildlife management. It is education for (rather than about) power and freedom. It requires us to be willing to demystify decision-making by rescuing planning from paternalistic organisations or politicians and making active participation a normal attribute of membership of the community.

THE PRACTICALITIES

What are the limitations?

There is plenty of literature available on the shortcomings and costs of community participation. These may include :-

- **who pays?**
  - the cost burden in both human and financial terms of starting and continuing a higher level of community interaction

- **who knows best?**
  - problems in reconciling differences between technical expertise and community knowledge (and consequent mistrust)
  - difficulties for the inexperienced in defining their needs
  - lack of awareness of the consequences of individual demands
  - the ease of creating unrealistic expectations
  - over-reliance on traditional solutions over creative and innovative solutions, to the detriment of the potentially very different needs of future generations

- **who is willing to share power?**
  - the unwillingness of those with power to share it and the inexperience of others to receive it and make wise use of it
  - lack of agreement on what level of participation is to be achieved

- **who are the community?**
  - difficulties in defining who 'the community' are
  - difficulty in establishing mechanisms that adequately represent all sectors of the community
  - lack of community organisation and structures to aid constructive participation

- **what's in it for people?**
  - difficulties of establishing incentives for a large proportion of the community to become involved
  - disincentives confronting the traditionally disenfranchised in the community, including those less articulate
  - lack of community interest in and understanding of abstract concepts

- **why don't they come?**
  - the tendency to overestimate potential community response to opportunities for participation
  - the tendency for programs to lose their sense of purpose
  - difficulties of sustaining community interest beyond short-term and local issues

- **who's in control?**
  - difficulties of assimilating information quickly, processing it into a meaningful form and providing feedback
  - the tendency for organisations to control information flow, meetings, agendas, questionnaire design, and so on to the detriment of community input.

'A good thing' community participation may be, but a smooth road it certainly is not.

What are the gains?

Given such limitations we need to be quite clear that the potential gains are sufficient to justify the pursuit of meaningful participation. These benefits may include :-

- better plans that reflect actual community aspirations and more effectively address a range of social needs and priorities

- better mutual understanding through clarification of value differences between the organisation and the community, and through demystification of the planning and design process

- sharing of power and responsibility through levels of government and the community down to the individual

- broader ownership of, or investment in, the decision-making process and its products

- increased community self-respect through development of cohesion, consensus and an ability to affect outcomes

- increased personal growth and development through enhanced self-worth, environmental and social competence and achievement, and reduced apathy and alienation

- constructive partnership between the community and the organisation through the development of a shared vision, the input of local information that educates both the community and the organisation, and development of links to community groups for on-going involvement

- mutual trust and communication with increased community support for, and commitment to, organisational goals, policies and programs and increased organisational support for community aspirations and activities.

Is there a recipe for success?

While there can be no single recipe that guarantees success, it takes no imagination to accept that the challenge is to design a process that addresses as many of the limitations as possible, and maximises as many of the benefits as possible. This is traditionally portrayed as a weighing up between advantages and disadvantages, benefits and costs. Such an analysis belies the complexity of social values compared with quantifiable values. We might as well toss a coin and if we don't get the answer we want, make it two out of three or best of five until we do.

The real issue is what sort of society we wish to help create :-

- one in which traditional power structures are maintained and reinforced by our attitudes and activities as professionals

  or

- one in which all sectors of society are assisted to share in the creation of new futures and new realities that enhance quality of life for present and future generations.

Fostering of the latter through community participation in planning seems to require :-

- commitment to the process as well as the product

- clear objectives and direction

- focus on a few key issues

- timing of participation sufficiently early to build trust

- opportunities to participate at all stages of planning and decision-making

- willingness to listen and be open to creative solutions

- willingness to share power

- adequate resources to commit to the process

- willingness to reach out deeply and widely within the community for participants

- ready access to skilled communicators and facilitators

- ready access to technical expertise

- knowledge of bureaucracy and power structures

- knowledge of genuine (as distinct from contrived) constraints

- use of plain English (and other languages where necessary)

- treatment of people as individuals rather than as demographic averages or social indicators

- minimal use of statistics and quantification

- information and interaction through accessible and approachable locations within the community

- opportunities to register interest or views without having to speak in public or make written submissions

- opportunities to review and obtain feedback on submissions and input at draft stage

- options to participate on an equal footing either through organised groups or as individuals

- financial resources

- effective leadership

- organisational skills

- good media relations.

Clearly many of these ingredients are not readily available to community groups or individuals, and organisations can do a great deal to assist the community to participate meaningfully.

Perhaps we can constructively borrow from the thinking of those involved with community development in England to put forward the following guiding principles for participation :-

1. It's the community's process and the community's agenda.

2. People learn and grow through participation - not through being told.

3. People need honesty about real constraints.

4. The neighbourhood should be found, not prescribed.

5. Solutions are tools, not ends.

6. Participants are accountable for the process and the outcomes.

7. Professionalism requires continued commitment to openness, learning and yielding of control.

SUMMARY AND RECAP

Ours is a social mission. We can play a vital role in improving the quality of life for all in our society, and our success or failure needs to be measured in terms of social values.

The community play a vital role in supporting our activities. Retention of community support may mean sustained political support for our programs even when times are tough. Community support comes from respect we earn for our performance, not from awe at our qualifications or knowledge.

Planning processes deal with values, resources and facilities that are owned by the community. This should provide us with a new sense of the community as individuals: not visitors to, or users of, our areas and facilities; but the owners of those areas and facilities for whom we hold them in trust. As parks and recreation practitioners we are part of the community; we work with the rest of the community in a partnership of mutual benefit.

The planning process too is owned by the community, not by us or the government. The process is every bit as important as the product. Its success needs to be measured by the satisfaction of those who participate and the personal growth they experience as a result, not by the extent to which our preconceived ideas were satisfied.

This 'de-professionalising' of planning is more apparent than real. Professionalism is an approach not a qualification, and as professionals open to learning we do not lose but gain from the process. We are not diminished but enriched by the process.

We need to understand that meaningful community participation is an active and creative process. In this it contrasts with essentially passive and reactive processes often treated as synonymous - input, involvement and consultation.

While techniques selected for participation may vary, the principles should not: we need to aim as much as possible for the 'creative participatory democracy' model. We need the will on the part of individuals and community groups to be more trusting of organisations (although this can only come through successful participation), and we need the will on the part of both to listen and learn from each other.

Participation has both disadvantages and advantages. These are not to be weighed against each other but sorted by a clear sense of the kind of society we feel it is important to foster. We will know that we have succeeded here when we see creative participation treated not as an exercise or as something to be debated, but as a normal facet of citizenship and as part of an organisation's culture.

Participation may not lead to a very different design or plan, but what matters most is that it creates a different sense of ownership and responsibility in the participants. The success of the process cannot then be assessed quantitatively. If people in the community are only visitors or users, we can just count them, and participation can be a mere shadow offering some semblance of legitimacy. If they are in fact the owners we need to measure their satisfaction in their sense of ownership. Participation then acquires real substance and offers real growth and power.

These outcomes require some fundamental shifts in what have become traditional paternalistic approaches. It requires an opening up of a profession dominated by people with technical and environmental science backgrounds to the thinking and perspectives of others with backgrounds in behavioural and social sciences. It requires development of a new sense of the community, a new sense of what really matters, and a new sense of our purpose and responsibilities in the parks and recreation field.

CONCLUSION

No apology is made for not providing in this paper a catalogue of techniques for participation. Such a catalogue will be of no assistance until we are quite clear about our own value systems and our objectives for the process. For those who wish to read more about techniques and principles we have incorporated some very varied titles for suggested reading.

Hopefully, we have offered some food for thought that will alter approaches to community participation in planning, and for that matter to the whole of our dealings with the community, of which we too are a part.

We close with a little adage that is also apt to the areas and facilities which we hold in trust: 'If you want to know if the shoe fits, ask the wearer not the producer'.

This also has a corollary: 'If a producer continues to produce shoes that do not fit the wearer, it is that producer who will surely decline'.

SOME SUGGESTED READING

Sarkissian, W. and Perlgut, D. (eds.) (1988). *The community participation handbook: resources for public involvement in the planning process.* (Impacts Press: Sydney)
[a useful collection of local case studies, with helpful analysis]

Butz, M. (1988). To harness the energy or to hobble the enemy: which way for community participation? In: *Open spaces, people places.* Proceedings of the 61st National Conference of the Royal Australian Institute of Parks and Recreation. (Royal Australian Institute of Parks and Recreation: Sydney)
[summarises some simple but effective approaches and techniques]

Knopf, R.C., Allison, M.T., Robertson, R.D. and Leatherberry, E.C. (*circa* 1987). Under-representation and over-representation in outdoor recreation: who gets what and why? *In* Dustin, D.L. (ed.) *Justice in outdoor recreation resource allocation.* (Institute for Leisure Behaviour: San Diego, USA)
[lines up social justice with parks and recreation priorities]

Ward, C. (1976). *Housing: an anarchist approach.* (Freedom Press: London)
[thought provoking and equally applicable to parks and recreation]