COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT SOCIETY’S NATIONAL MEETING SCHEDULED FOR PA IN AUGUST

Last year it was way out in Washington state. This year, the national meeting of the Community Development Society will be in Hershey, PA! The dates to block in on your calendar are August 3-6, 1981. The place is the Hershey Conference Center. Some of the workshop topics include networking and learning from others on a contract basis; economic development, community growth and local growth management; the group process and community leader development; the problems associated with choices of no growth, no technology, no change communities; and ethical issues in community development. For additional information contact Sam Leadley, local arrangements chairman, at 204 Weaver Building, University Park, PA 16802, (814) 865-0455.

Hershey Conference Center
Hershey, Pennsylvania

THE ATTITUDE OF PUBLIC AGENCIES TOWARD PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AS PERCEIVED BY THEIR SENIOR ADMINISTRATORS

By John L. Crompton, Charles W. Lamb, and Patrick Schul

ABSTRACT

The literature suggests that a primary factor contributing to the limited effectiveness of public participation efforts is a negative agency attitude toward such input. A sample of 160 senior administrators in public recreation and park agencies in Texas identified their agencies' attitudes toward public participation. Their responses indicated that their agencies were favorably disposed toward public participation. Perception of agency support for public participation did not vary significantly with the age, sex or educational level of senior administrators, but it was found that agencies employing a larger number of full-time personnel were significantly more supportive of public participation.

Debate about the value of citizen participation has been prominent since the Equal Opportunity Act was passed in 1964 with its well-known “maximum feasible participation” clause. Regardless of the type and structure of citizen participation, it has significantly altered the course of planning in America (Burke, 1979). Many feel that citizen involvement has the potential to substantially influence the way in which public agencies make decisions at all levels of government. Strong demands for input have emerged, most notably from minority groups. In response to these demands many community governmental agencies have tried to increase citizens’ participation in decisions. However, some remain skeptical of its potential: “It remains to be seen whether public participation can have any role in any functions of local government or whether it is merely an optimistic, naive, ideology” (Tyrwhitt & Bell, 1972:71).

The primary benefit claimed by supporters of public involvement is that it enables an agency to make better, more sensitive decisions by making

John L. Crompton is an assistant professor in the Department of Recreation and Parks and Charles W. Lamb is an associate professor in the Department of Marketing, at Texas A&M University. Patrick Schul is an assistant professor in Management/Marketing at the University of Alabama.

managers and planners more aware of the range of alternatives and by ensuring that their actions reflect public desires. Without public involvement, the administrative process tends to produce not the voice of the people, but the voice of the bureaucrat (Rosenbaum, W. A., 1978). Such involvement is likely to lead to increased public support, since people involved in making decisions are more likely to support those decisions, causing implementation of a proposal to move more quickly and easily.

At a conceptual level, the potential advantages of public involvement are probably widely recognized, and a variety of methods have been used to facilitate it (Heberlein, 1975). However, genuine commitment to implementation of citizen involvement in the agency decision-making process is frequently minimal and where this commitment is forthcoming it is typically short-lived (Mazmanian & Nienaber, 1976). It has been suggested that at least part of the reason for the lack of commitment to implementation is to be found in bureaucratic and organization theory which asserts that:

Bureaucracy is resistant to change; agencies pursue the wrong policies; they are responsive to only an elite and not to the general public; they make their decisions behind closed doors; and only the threat of litigation will force bureaucrats grudgingly to allow ordinary mortals to participate in the decision-making process. The notion of encouraging outsiders to participate in agency policy making or to pass judgement on their programs and policies runs counter to the bureaucratic laws of conservatism, hierarchy, expanding control, imperialism and self-serving loyalty (Mazmanian & Nienaber, 1976).

Public agencies often perceive a number of risks and costs associated with public involvement. There may be a great deal of resistance to the collection and utilization of information that agency personnel find diversionary, antagonistic or threatening (Ingram, 1976). There is a tendency in many fields to adhere to particular value premises and policy outcomes that are considered to be the "right" ones for society. These entrenched professional values in an agency tend to resist inputs from public participation since they are frequently viewed as unknowable (Doerkson & Pierce, 1976). Participation can be extremely costly, time consuming, cause long delays in action, and may expand the number and intensity of conflicts (Checkoway & Van Til, 1978).

Public involvement efforts may serve to promote goals which are incompatible with agency objectives and bureaucratic incentives. They can and do challenge preconceptions, previously accepted ways of doing things and existing objectives. Participation programs, in effect, often amount to proposals that an agency cultivate criticism of its mission, planning and professional judgments. Conscientious officials may resist citizen input because it confronts them with the demand that they adopt attitudes or behaviors which are at variance with those thought necessary for organizational productivity (Rosenbaum, W. A., 1978).

In his evaluation of public involvement efforts made by the Corps of Engineers, Mazmanian (1976) concluded: "All too frequently one hears said of one or another of the public participation efforts that 'the planning effort was a great program but we won't be trying it again.'" It was felt that such efforts were too costly and required too many man-hours for too little input.

The literature suggests that public agencies are frequently negative toward public involvement:

Citizen participation requirements have demoralized creative administrators and have prevented them from utilizing their expertise and experience in solving problems. Decisions tend to reflect the lowest common denominator — the minimum acceptable alternative to all groups and individuals — rather than the best judgement of knowledgeable officials (Rosenbaum, N. M., 1978).

Indeed, some commentators and researchers maintain that effective public participation is not possible under the existing institutional structures (Hendee & Stankey, 1975). In his study of seventy federal water planners Wilson (1973) reported that although some planners indicated limited willingness to involve the community in plan development, most held very low opinions of the public's ability to aid their plans; public involvement was undertaken primarily to expedite acceptance of the planner's ideas. Similarly, Mazmanian and Nienaber (1976) found there was not much real support in the Corps of Engineers for public involvement: "On the question of involving the public in the planning process, very few agencies people were wholeheartedly enthusiastic about it."

A more encouraging finding was reported by Hendee and his colleagues. They concluded from a series of case studies conducted among U.S. Forest Service personnel, that agency commitment to public involvement, particularly at the field level, was sincere and well-meaning, even though actual performance left much to be desired: "The shortcomings, in most cases, appeared to result from honest mistakes in execution, rather than from any sinister effort to subvert public participation" (Hendee & Stankey, 1975). Commenting on the same series of studies, Hendee (1977) elsewhere reported:

The study team's data and impressions from interviews clearly indicate that experience with public involvement tends to develop or reinforce commitment to it. There were few negative attitudes towards public involvement from foresters immersed in the process
at field levels—but suspicion and mistrust of it among those observing at a distance was occasionally encountered.

PURPOSE AND PARAMETERS OF THE STUDY

Given the negative evidence of agency experiences with public involvement frequently reported in the literature, it is not surprising to find observers concluding that agencies often move ahead as they wish, regardless of public opinion (Hendee & Stankey, 1975). The authors of this study sought to gain insight into how committed public agencies were to implement public participation. Agencies are comprised of individuals and the degree of commitment exhibited by an agency is likely to be most accurately reflected by those who are in a position to impose their will on the agency.

The study reported here was limited to considering the attitude of public agencies toward public involvement from the perspective of senior administrators. However, it is recognized that there are at least three sets of political actors to whom the term public involvement may have a different meaning: elected officials, public administrators, and citizens. Each of these groups operates under different kinds of personal, organizational and political constraints, and each group has different values, expectations and goals (Rosener, 1978). It is possible that if citizens or elected officials presented their perspective on the attitude of public agencies toward public participation that different results would emerge. The decision to solicit the perspectives of senior managers was made, since the literature suggests they are the group most likely to be responsible for influencing and directing an agency's overall attitude toward public involvement (Mazmanian & Nienaber, 1976; McCarthy, 1975).

Senior administrators from the field of recreation and parks were selected as the sample for this study. There were two primary reasons for this. First, exploratory investigations in several cities revealed that agencies and their administrators, in the recreation and parks field, were frequently involved in public participation exercises. Second, since recreation and park services were common to almost all cities, a diversity of agency types could be expected to be represented in the sample.

Three questions were addressed in this study. The major question of concern was: Are public agencies committed to soliciting, and responding to, inputs from citizens? Mazmanian (1976) reported that direct public involvement was an inconsequential part of the operations of every federal agency. When important policies or programs were being assessed, the general public was typically kept in the dark and only informed well after the commitments were made. Is this finding typical of the status of public involvement at the local government level?

A second question was: Do different sized agencies demonstrate different levels of commitment? It was hypothesized that there would be greater resistance to public involvement among larger agencies because they are more likely to exhibit the classic characteristics of a bureaucracy (Downs, 1967).

Within any group of administrators there are likely to be differences in the way individuals or sub-groups view participation and Rosener (1978) states that the importance of these differences cannot be overemphasized. Hence, the third question of concern in the study was: Are there any relationships between differences in the level of agency commitment and the age, sex or educational levels of senior administrators?

METHODOLOGY

The data were collected as part of a larger study of recreation and park practitioners’ attitudes toward public involvement. A questionnaire was mailed to all 449 active recreation and park practitioners who were certified as professional members of the Texas Recreation and Park Society. A professional member has to be employed in the field on a fulltime basis. Recent applicants for professional membership have had to possess a baccalaureate degree from an accredited educational institution. Some exceptions to the degree requirement were made in earlier years if applicants possessed extensive work experience in the field.

Two follow-up mailings to nonrespondents were undertaken and a total of 373 usable responses were obtained. This resulted in a response rate of 83 percent. Analysis of variance tests indicated that there were no significant differences between the responses of those who replied to the third questionnaire mailout. This, together with the relatively small nonresponse rate, suggests it is unlikely that responses from nonrespondents would have caused any substantive changes in the findings of the study.

To ascertain managerial level designations, and thus identify senior administrators, respondents were asked their job title. The data analyzed in the study reported here were gathered from practitioners occupying positions of director, assistant director, or superintendent in their organization. Of the 373 subjects participating in the general study, 160 respondents met these criteria and constitute the sample for this analysis.

Scale items designed to measure senior administrators’ perceptions of their agency’s philosophy toward public involvement were developed from a review of the public involvement literature, and exploratory interviews with recreation and park practitioners and others familiar with public involvement. Arnein (1969) has suggested a typology identifying eight different levels of participation in planning and operating public programs, which are conceptualized as rungs on a ladder. These range from
the lowest rungs of manipulation and therapy, which describe levels of “nonparticipation” that have been contrived by some to substitute for genuine participation, to the highest rungs of delegated power and citizen control in which citizens obtain full managerial control. Some have concluded that the general level of participation can best be characterized as being on the lower rungs of this ladder (Hendee & Stankey, 1975). In developing the scale, an effort was made to design items which reflected a commitment to the higher rungs of the participation ladder.

The original scale items were pilot tested and subsequently revised. The scale items used in the final questionnaire are shown in Table 1. Two scale items were deleted from the original scale based upon the results of a factor analysis which showed that these items failed to load significantly on the derived factor. A varimax rotation of the scale items showed that all ten statements included in Table 1 were representative of general practitioner attitudes toward public involvement.

For each of the ten scale items, respondents were asked to indicate their agency's attitude toward public involvement. In the instructions accompanying the questionnaire, it was stressed that respondents should ignore their personal attitudes and circle the number that reflected their perceptions of their agency’s attitude toward public involvement. Responses were recorded on a 7-point, Likert-type scale ranging from completely agree to completely disagree.

Reliability of the public involvement scale was assessed by determining the extent to which the construct measure was repeatable. The internal consistency of the scale was assessed by coefficient alpha, which for the 10-item scale was .571. Nunnally (1967) suggests that in early stages of basic research reliability levels of .50 to .60 are acceptable. The reliability of the public involvement scale, therefore, appears to be adequate for the purpose intended.

Content validity can be defined as the “degree…to which an operationalization represents the concept about which generalizations are to be made” (Zaltman, Pinson & Angleman, 1973:46). The process of actively interviewing involved practitioners to solicit the key issues surrounding public involvement suggests that the domain of public involvement was comprehensively addressed and a reasonable level of content validity achieved.

A series of categorical questions regarding the administrator’s sex, age, and educational level were included on the instrument. Agency size was operationalized in two ways. First, respondents were asked to state their agency’s annual operation and maintenance budget. Second, they identified the number of full-time employees under their supervision.

It was recognized that senior administrators may have been inclined to respond favorably toward their agency’s attitude toward public involve-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Mean Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Recreation and Park decisions in my agency are always made with the user in mind.</td>
<td>5.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My agency considers citizen input to be an academic idea that does not work in practice.</td>
<td>5.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My agency conducts research, surveys and special studies on a regular basis to determine the need and desires of the public we serve.</td>
<td>4.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen involvement has little influence on my agency’s day-to-day management of recreation and park services.</td>
<td>4.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The movement toward more citizen input has made my agency’s recreation management decisions more effective.</td>
<td>4.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From the standpoint of users, citizen involvement in my agency has produced relatively few benefits.</td>
<td>5.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The adoption and implementation of citizen input has been one of the most important advances in operating my recreation and park agency since World War II.</td>
<td>4.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen involvement has had no effect in forcing my agency to develop facilities and services which fit more precisely the wants and needs of users.</td>
<td>5.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My agency has found it is not practical to involve the participants and/or community in the planning and decision-making process.</td>
<td>5.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My agency does not really support citizen involvement, but goes along with it because it is mandated.</td>
<td>5.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grand mean 5.13

Responses were coded so that a 1 always indicated the most negative attitude and a 7 always indicated the most positive attitude.

In recent years, there has been an on-going debate about the usefulness of seeking input into public agency decisions. This is one of
the most controversial areas in the public sector. Some believe that
it is a practical strategy which has led to more effective delivery of
services. Others feel either that it is ineffective or that the time and
effort required, when measured against the results obtained, represent
an unacceptable level of cost.

FINDINGS

First, separate means were derived for each of the 10 Likert-type
scale item statements. For ease of interpretation, the responses were coded
so that a 1 always indicated the most negative response with respect to
public involvement and a 7 always indicated the most positive attitude.
Thus, “completely agree” responses to statements, 1, 3, 5, 7, and 8 were
coded as 7. “Completely disagree” responses to statements 2, 4, 6, 9, and
10 were also coded 7. The mean scores of scale items in Table 1 show
that senior administrators believe their agencies react positively toward
public involvement in their operations. Indeed, when frequency dis-
tributions were reviewed, the percentage of respondents reporting a
score of 5, 6, or 7 on each scale item never dropped below 49 percent
and exceeded 65 percent on 7 of the 10 scale items. These scores were
assigned to the categories partially agree, mostly agree and completely
agree.

It was hypothesized that significant differences may arise in the im-
plementation of public involvement procedures among agencies with dif-
f erent sized budgets and numbers of personnel. For example, larger
agencies may be expected to exhibit a stronger commitment because of
the more substantial resources they have available for effectively orga-
nizing and integrating public participation procedures. Alternately, larger
agencies might be expected to exhibit greater resistance to public in-
volvement because they are more likely to exhibit the classic characteristics
of bureaucracy than are smaller agencies.

Two-way analysis of variance was used to determine the extent to
which differences in agencies’ commitment to public involvement tended
to vary according to differences in budget level and the number of full-
time personnel. Although mean attitudes toward public involvement varied upwards as the budget size of agencies increased (Table 3), these
differences were not significant (Table 2). However, the analysis indicated
that the level of agency commitment did vary significantly according to
the number of full-time personnel (Table 2). Duncan’s Multiple Range
test showed that larger agencies employing over 45 people had more posi-
tive attitudes toward public involvement procedures than did smaller
agencies (Table 3).

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>d.f.</th>
<th>Sums of Squares</th>
<th>F-Value</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Budget (A)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.498</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time employees (B)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.85</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>.017*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A × B</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significant at the .05 level of significance.

Table 3

| Independent Treatment Means and Duncan’s Multiple Range Test for the
Dependent Variable “Public Involvement” and Independent Variables “Budget
Size” and “Full-Time Employees” for Recreation and Park Agencies |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Budget Size</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Grouping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than $500,000</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$300,000-$2,500,000</td>
<td>5.17</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over $2,500,000</td>
<td>5.36</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-Time Employees</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 16</td>
<td>4.98</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-45</td>
<td>4.88</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 45</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significance level = .05.

The analysis revealed no significant relationship between extent of
agencies’ commitment toward public participation and the age, sex or
educational levels of senior administrators (Table 4).

DISCUSSION

Three major findings emerged. First, the public agencies reviewed in
this study appear to be favorably disposed toward public involvement.
Senior administrators indicated that their agencies have positive attitudes
regarding the involvement of citizens in decisionmaking. Second, con-
trary to the initial hypothesis, larger agencies appeared to foster a more
positive disposition toward implementing public involvement procedures
than did smaller agencies. This tendency was significant when size was
measured by number of full-time personnel. When size was operationalized
by annual operating budget, the trend remained consistent but the size differences were not significant. Third, attitudes regarding public involvement did not vary significantly according to administrators' age, sex or educational levels.

This study provides supporting evidence to support the contention that public agencies recognize the important role of public participation in their operations. It is recognized that assessing attitude toward public involvement is not, on its own, an adequate method for evaluating agency behavior. There is a considerable difference between positive attitude or acceptance of the concept at a philosophical level, and the more demand-

Table 4
Analysis of Variance Seeking the Effects of Age, Sex and Educational Level on Senior Administrators' Perceptions of Their Agency's Philosophies on Public Involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>d.f.</th>
<th>Sums of Squares</th>
<th>F-Value</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (A)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex (B)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (C)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A X B</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A X C</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.32</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B X C</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ing criterion of implementation behavior. However, a positive attitude is a necessary condition for positive behavior. The literature has frequently identified negative agency attitudes, particularly among federal agencies, as a primary contributing factor to the lack of success of public involvement programs. The evidence presented in this study suggests that, if the sample of agencies used here is representative, there is a widespread proclivity for public involvement to be integrated into agencies' policy development and decision-making procedures at the local government level. This finding suggests that efforts to identify factors contributing to the perceived limited effectiveness of involvement efforts may more usefully be focused upon such concerns as identifying superior methods of communication, developing improved techniques for implementation and testing alternate strategies for arousing citizen motivation.

REFERENCES


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