

Healthy Communities – Beyond Civic Virtue

Introduction

A clean environment, sound public health, and a sustainable economy are all essential aspects of a healthy community. In the United States, responsibility for these policy areas has historically been allocated across the different levels of government. At the federal level, beginning in 1970, strong environmental policies were established through legislation such as the Clean Air Act (1970), the Clean Water Act (1972), and the Safe Drinking Water Act (1974). In 1980, under the Healthy People 2000 process, targets were set for improving public health outcomes¹. Going beyond just the United States, the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, focused global attention on the critical importance of sustainable economic development.

By most measures the environment has improved, but it has not reached the level of quality envisioned in the legislation passed twenty to thirty years ago. Similarly, although some aspects of public health are showing significant improvement (smoking rates), others need greater progress (reducing childhood lead exposure and improving access to prenatal care), and some have actually deteriorated (asthma rates in children and adults). On the economic front, the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has grown steadily, but its Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI)² has shown a steady decrease. In terms of multi-pronged sustainability efforts, there are only anecdotal examples of improvement and many fundamental issues remain unaddressed.

It is in this context of mixed results that we consider the numerous healthy community-type activities taking place at the local level, often under no governmental authority. Despite the concern that too many of us are “bowling alone”³, the number of ongoing community improvement projects runs into the tens of thousands. Organizations such as the National Association of Counties (NACo), The Nature Conservancy's Center for Compatible Economic Development (CCED), the Northern Sustainable Communities Network, River Network, Healthy Communities, the Alliance for National Renewal, and the Mountain Association for Community Economic Development (MACED) provide valuable technical assistance and support to communities across the country.

The number and scope of these projects is without precedent in our history. The range of activities extends well beyond the traditional efforts of civic service organizations focused on hospitals, fire and police protection, or children's athletics and scholarship. Similarly, the kinds of things being done are more involved than merely hosting a fundraising event and presenting a check to an individual or organization. Project design is growing in sophistication, reflecting the increased complexity of our problems. New projects are set up as partnerships among institutions to promote economic revitalization, river restoration, social justice, and collective

¹ *Healthy People 2000: National Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Objectives*, U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, Publication No. (PHS) 91-50213, September, 1990.

² Redefining Progress, <http://www.rprogress.org/>

³ *Bowling Alone: Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Putnam, Robert D., Touchstone Books, August, 2001

efforts for preventing substance abuse and domestic violence. As their benefits are documented, successful projects illustrate the possibilities to other communities and elicit imitation.

Many of the community improvement projects that address health, environment, and economic development are developing solutions that would be difficult to implement by centralized government action. This expansion in activity at the community level is partially the result of previous experience with government programs. In many cases, realization of national or regional policy goals requires a community approach because the results of government-sponsored programs over the last two decades have been inadequate.

The purpose of this article is to clarify the need for even greater community action to accomplish national policy goals. Although community goals are largely consistent with state and national goals, local efforts can be overwhelmed by regional, national, and international trends. Greater coordination between local projects and centralized authorities should improve communication and lead to a better integration of responsibilities. In order to accomplish the goals that local projects identify, and national policies require, policy makers need to acknowledge the importance of local action, thereby adding credibility and focus to community projects and maximizing their prospects for success.

Community-based environmental protection

We have spent most of the past ten years working with communities interested in improving environmental conditions. Issues such as water quality, land use and natural resource depletion have proven difficult to address using the regulatory approaches sponsored through state and federal environmental agencies. Habitat destruction, especially adjacent to human communities, is accelerating and ecological systems suffer as a result ⁴(reference). Most urban and suburban rivers are harmed by a combination of sediment and alterations in hydrology and temperature, resulting in a degraded environment for many species of fish. Resources such as open space and water are becoming scarce in our rapidly expanding metropolitan areas and while “limits to growth” remain an arguable assertion ⁵, several communities have placed restrictions on growth due to threatened resource shortages.

The current set of environmental problems is distinct from earlier problems addressed by simpler solutions. For those early problems, a few large contributors to environmental damage could be identified and regulations established to decrease their damaging actions. Today’s problems are more likely to be the result of actions taken by a large portion of the public and are not limited to the activities of a few polluters. The solutions are varied and do not fit into the already voluminous sets of regulations on the books because the sources are so numerous and individual.

Dozens of examples of community-based environmental protection exist throughout the country. There is a national need for thousands more. The U.S. EPA has acknowledged the

⁴ *Habitat Destruction and Degradation*, Edge, W. Daniel, Dept, of Fisheries and Wildlife, Oregon State University, <http://www.orst.edu/instruct/fw251/notebook/habitat.html>

⁵ Charles C. Mann, *The Atlantic Monthly*; February 1993; *How Many Is Too Many?*; Volume 271, No. 2; pages 47 - 67.

value of the community-based environmental protection^{6,7,8} approach in general terms, but this approach has not been integrated into the implementation of laws that the EPA is charged with enforcing. State policy largely mirrors federal policy, and with a few notable exceptions (Oregon, Washington, New Jersey, Massachusetts watershed programs), there is a similar lack of effective integration of community-based efforts.

Watershed health as an example

More than 21,000 bodies of water in the United States do not meet water quality standards, as determined by state and/or federal standards⁹. This state of water quality exists despite more than 90 billion dollars spent on wastewater control investment¹⁰. The current culprits in water quality degradation are associated with land use, housing development, runoff from highways and farmland, and the alteration of stream hydrology caused by a greater density of human uses and increased navigation. Federal statutes and court orders require that the states and the EPA develop plans to ensure that all of the 21,000 rivers and lakes meet designated water quality standards. Because each lake and river is different a one-plan-fits-all approach will not work. The cost for developing these plans is estimated to be up to \$69 million annually for the next fifteen years, and the cost for implementing the plans may require as much as \$4.3 billion annually¹¹.

Despite this dire situation, there is hope. There are more than 3,600 watershed groups in this country¹², each organized for the purpose of improving the quality of their local rivers and lakes. Very few of these organizations work under the auspices of state or federal environmental agencies, and their actions are generally not dictated by state or federal statute. In most cases, these groups are seeking collaborative, watershed-based approaches to improving water quality. Central to the collaboration is the general observation that improved water quality will bring a broad set of benefits to members of the community, including the persons responsible for its degradation.

One story of partial success is the Elizabeth River Project in the Tidewater region of Virginia. In 1992, a handful of concerned citizens began meeting to consider how to improve conditions in the Elizabeth River. This historic, heavily industrialized river had suffered decades of abuse from antiquated industrial and navigation practices. Clean water legislation during the 1970s slowed the continuing degradation but was insufficient to effect restoration. The citizens began a process of analysis, stakeholder involvement, and partnership building to initiate a series of

⁶ *People, Places, and Partnerships: A Progress Report on Community-Based Environmental Protection*, EPA-100-R-97-003, July 1997

⁷ *Community-Based Environmental Protection: A Resource Book for Protecting Ecosystems and Communities*, EPA 230-B-96-003, September, 1997

⁸ *EPA's Framework for Community-Based Environmental Protection*, EPA 237-K-99-001, February, 1999

⁹ U.S. EPA's National Picture of Impaired Waters web page: <http://www.epa.gov/owow/tmdl/states/national.html>

¹⁰ *Progress in Water Quality: An Evaluation of the National Investment in Municipal Wastewater Treatment*, EPA Office of Wastewater Management, EPA-832-R-00-008, June, 2000.

¹¹ EPA Estimates Costs of Clean Water Program, <http://www.epa.gov/>

¹² River Network, <http://www.rivernetwork.org/library/libmov.cfm>

recommendations and actions. Today, the Elizabeth River Project oversees activities costing millions of dollars, and citizens on the waterfront of Norfolk are beginning to shift their focus back to the resource that served as the origin for earlier prosperity.

Unfortunately, most watershed groups do not have the analytic or legal capacity to accomplish the level of improvements that they envision and that federal water quality policy requires. In many cases, the groups organize in spite of rather in concert with environmental agency programs.

The dilemma for government and local partnership.

Many local activists see governmental involvement as a negative force in local conditions. Environmental agencies have the authority to issue permits for certain activities such as land use (through zoning and building permits), water pollution (through discharge permits), and the outright destruction of habitat (through construction of roads and schools). Even in cases where government agencies initiate programs for improving local conditions, their role is often not as clearly pro-environment as activists would wish. In contrast, many local businesses and homeowners may perceive government agencies as being too pro-environment. Government agencies must include all stakeholders in public processes, including those that may contribute to environmental degradation such as developers or industrial interests. Local organizations that do not work under government auspices are not required to include the interests of the development community, and many of them choose not to.

On the other hand, local participation in environmental protection efforts can be frustrating for governmental agencies. Often times, the motivation for local participation is to ensure that the needs of the community are met and that the resources from the community are utilized effectively. However, local projects tend to generate customized solutions that fit local conditions rather than state or federal agency guidelines. While governments want to encourage locally developed and implemented solutions, requirements for consistency can keep them from providing resources from state or federal programs.

Although it is tempting to suggest that government regulation be overhauled to provide more authority to local projects, significant political forces would resist the diminution in state or federal authority that would likely be required. The key to enhancing local efforts to improve community conditions is to maintain state and/or federal government authority while providing local stakeholders with the ability to act.

A description of a state-local partnership that works - *The Oregon Watershed Councils*

A decade ago, Oregon water resource managers recognized the need for a new approach to managing Oregon's watersheds, one that would integrate the efforts of state agencies and private landowners. A statewide debate among Oregon stakeholders led to consensus on the "1992 Watershed Management Strategy for Oregon." Legislation passed in 1993 codified the strategy, which was based on the formation of voluntary local watershed councils—cooperative partnerships representing a balance of interested and affected persons. Early efforts to

implement the approach reflected state managers and others' concerns about local councils' abilities to improve watershed management, and council efforts were initially supervised by state agencies. Councils were resistant to state direction of their efforts, and by 1995 new legislation provided funding and guidance for establishing watershed councils, emphasizing their voluntary, local nature. Formation of a council became a local government decision¹³

Local councils in Oregon are playing a significant role in a number of the state's water quality initiatives, notably the Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds. The Oregon Plan is a comprehensive program for restoring salmon in coastal river basins, and it represents a unifying vision among Oregon agencies whose activities affect salmon populations or habitat. The Governor's 1999 Executive Order for the Plan specifically includes watershed councils and outlines their roles alongside state agency partners and other entities involved in implementing the Plan. In fact, the Plan recognizes watershed councils as "vehicles for getting the work done."¹⁴

Oregon may be unique in the extent to which it has legitimized the role of voluntary local organizations in achieving state water resource goals. In 1999, the Oregon Legislature created the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, directing the state to support local councils, both technically and financially. The Board now provides support and networking opportunities to 86 active watershed councils. A recent study of watershed councils in the Pacific Northwest states found that the most effective councils were those that were consistently funded and had strong ties with state technical resources¹⁵. While most states have acknowledged the need for a more meaningful partnership in achieving water quality goals, few have made a strong political and fiscal commitment to moving forward.

Community Projects seeking a niche

Examples of state--local partnerships yielding creative results are still rare. In some cases, local governments are developing innovative policies of their own to address local needs. Similar to some nongovernmental efforts, municipal governments seek to identify policy issues that can be tackled without state and federal agency participation.

¹³ Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, amendment of ORS 541.388, <http://landru.leg.state.or.us:80/orlaws/sess0300.dir/0300ses.html>, approved June 22, 1999.

¹⁴ Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds, <http://www.oregon-plan.org/>

¹⁵ *An Evaluation of Selected Watershed Councils in the Pacific Northwest and Northern California*, Trout Unlimited and Pacific Rivers Council, 2000.

Projects sponsored by the Columbus Department of Health (CDOH) in Ohio show a progression in the scope of local community-based initiatives. In 1993, the CDOH began a project to determine priorities for efforts to improve environmental conditions. This project was driven, in part, by the need to deal with unfunded mandates. The city estimated that it would need to spend more than one billion dollars to comply with laws and regulations on the books since 1990. The Priorities '95 project was intended identify priorities on which to focus limited public resources. After convening a broad representation of stakeholders, the project evolved into identifying desirable activities that nonetheless fell outside of the traditional responsibilities of municipal environmental health agencies. In order to restore and protect area stream corridors, CDOH approached landowners about land purchases or conservation easements, offering agreeable landowners appropriate public recognition. The department also set up a volunteer corps to map and inventory vegetative cover, land use, flora, and fauna for implementation of an Assessment and Inventory Strategic Plan.

Following the success of Priorities '95, the CDOH initiated another project in 1999 to address the issue of air quality. Columbus meets the Ambient Air Quality Standards outlined in the federal Clean Air Act, but continuing growth and the possibility of tighter standards suggest that the city may fall out of compliance soon. Proactive planning led to the creation of the Community Leadership to Effect Air Emission Reductions (CLEAR) Initiative. The idea behind CLEAR is that by identifying the local impacts of air pollution, a local-level project could develop solutions that emphasized the benefits of the investments needed. This innovative approach differs from air quality planning in other parts of the country where projects must adhere to specific guidelines and seek approval for actions from state and federal authorities. For CLEAR projects, collaborative strategies are designed within the regulatory and policy framework established by the Clean Air Act but decision making takes place at the local level. This is a clear test case for tapping the potential of local action to address problems that must be resolved to meet federal air quality standards but which resist regulatory solutions.

Environmental issues are not unique

Our experience working with and reviewing processes for local projects has illustrated repeatedly that while the individual situations and stakeholders in each community are unique, the environmental issues themselves are not. Land use, water quality, and air quality affect each and every community in the world. Recognition of the importance of national policy regarding these topics is important. We need to improve how national policy is implemented at the local and regional level. Technical assistance, scientific research, and information sharing are all tasks that national agencies are in just the right place to undertake.

The synergizing of community projects

Many of the policy challenges confronting public health are similar to those outlined above for environmental protection. Furthermore, there is a substantial overlap in the causes of these two kinds of problems. Several organizations, such as the Pew Environmental Health Trust and

Turning Point, have recently been formed to explore the connections between public health and environmental protection. Although much is known about how the problems are interrelated, the pathways to developing synergistic solutions remain elusive.

Recent developments in Vermont present an example of state and local action cutting across public health and environmental policy lines. The state legislature required state agencies to provide information and technical assistance to a local school-based volunteer certification program and information-sharing network addressing environmental health. Information on non- and least-toxic materials, integrated pest management practices, and indoor air quality will all be shared through a state-run web site, and training assistance will be provided to all interested schools. Each school that qualifies for certification will set up an in-school team to develop an environmental health policy and management plan.¹⁶

Concerned with another set of linkages, the sustainable development movement is predicated on the idea that the health of the economy and the health of the environment are interrelated¹⁷. This movement also regards human health and social justice issues as being inextricably linked to both the economy and the environment. Given these posited interconnections, advocates of this perspective counsel communities to pursue policies that simultaneously strengthen all aspects of community health. This holistic approach is also a cornerstone of the Healthy Communities movement¹⁸.

Unfortunately, the dilemmas that make community-based environmental protection difficult to pursue are compounded when multiple outcomes are sought simultaneously. Individual government agencies have missions derived from statute, none of which address health together with environment together with economic development. Therefore, government sponsorship of broadly defined community projects is unavailable. Similarly, philanthropic foundations must seek focused outcomes from community projects, and they rarely have the luxury of sponsoring broadly defined community improvement projects.

Bucking the trend

Despite institutional hurdles, there are several examples of communities striving for better health, a better environment, and a stronger set of economic conditions.

Morton County, North Dakota

Most watershed projects are concerned mainly with promoting better land use and reducing water resource problems. Morton County's Harmon Lake Recreation Area project, however, incorporates important flood control requirements with an additional component: a nine-mile water-based recreation area. A plan is in place to concentrate and limit urban sprawl for this

¹⁶ NO. 125. An act relating to toxic materials and indoor air quality in Vermont public schools, H. 92, approved May 17, 2000.

¹⁷ Business Action for Sustainable Development, <http://www.iccwbo.org/basd/index.asp>

¹⁸ Seven Patterns of a Healthy Community, <http://www.healthycommunities.org/healthycommunities.html>

section of the county, which has experienced the fastest growth. The project is a joint effort between the Water Resource Boards and Soil Conservation Districts of Morton and Oliver Counties and includes state and federal agency involvement and the active participation of local citizens¹⁹.

Marion County, Oregon

Marion County has created two broadly inclusive organizations that promote stability and community activism. Since 1994, the county has established 13 Community Progress Teams, groups of community members who work to support children and families and create a safer community. They serve as conveners around important community issues and opportunities, collaborate with other groups, initiate projects and activities, and act as catalysts in articulating needs and finding solutions. The other major organization is Today's Choices: Tomorrow's Community. A core staff and volunteers act as impartial facilitators, collaborators and resources for dealing with highly charged community issues, and they promote multiple efforts toward reaching shared outcomes. The organization has sponsored efforts such as an economic summit, a children's voting project, and community discussions of regional growth management.²⁰

Racine County, Wisconsin

Spurred by the efforts of a local business leader, Racine County was among the first communities nationwide to espouse the values of a sustainable community. Citizens have mobilized to form Sustainable Racine, a community-led organization that has adopted high standards for residents and businesses and set immediate and far-reaching goals for environmental stewardship, economic development, and social justice. Citizen groups have met on ten areas of concern to create long-range visions and concrete objectives for action. Priority goal areas include excellence in education, regional planning, neighborhood revitalization, and downtown redevelopment.²¹

Buncombe County, North Carolina

An Asheville Chamber of Commerce study on attracting new business and industry led to a series of informal community meetings that resulted in the creation of a successful initiative. After completion of the study and publication of a community vision, task forces were formed on issues including education, the environment, jobs and job training, governmental operations, children and youth services, and community diversity. Important partnerships have formed in the health care industry, including a locally organized managed care program and a health care services program for uninsured people.²²

Addressing the dual dilemmas

¹⁹ *Profiles on Sustainability: County Leaders Building Sustainable Communities*, National Association of Counties (NACo), 1999, p.8.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.11.

²¹ *Ibid*, p.14.

²² *Ibid*, p.16.

While the handful of examples outlined above give us hope that a concerted effort to address multiple community needs is possible, the institutional barriers preventing greater effort need to be addressed. Government agencies need to develop explicit policies to support community-based action. The problem of having to ensure universal consistency among individual projects can be addressed by shifting the focus from a consistency in process via rules and regulations to a consistency in outcomes as measured by environmental, health, and economic endpoints. However, the difficulty of maintaining focus as communities work to attain multiple outcomes may never benefit from a magic bullet solution. There is also a need to improve communication and coordination across the multiple layers of government, local and national nonprofits, businesses, developers, and the public. The necessity of addressing national policy issues at the local level is clear, but the trick is in keeping such projects collaborative in operation.

And one further dilemma of multi-outcome projects

Local projects are not often subject to cost-benefit analyses. If they were, it might be difficult to identify projects that make sense on those terms as economic costs are more easily measured than social benefits are. For example, the benefits of local marketing cooperatives and coordinated human service delivery infrastructures range over many categories and are difficult to evaluate and communicate. Efforts to merge public health, environmental protection, and economic development initiatives are subject to similar difficulties, although there is a growing consensus that policies in these three areas, as well as social justice, are best pursued in a joint fashion.

The effort to recycle food waste via composting illustrates the difficulties in measuring complex redesign of local systems. This activity has multiple effects. It reduces the burden on solid waste management facilities and it reduces the cost to farmers for fertilizers and soil conditioners. Because such a program requires the conscious effort of restaurant operators and household kitchens, it may also raise general awareness regarding resource use. Finally, such a program that is necessarily local, and which encourages local food production, has many benefits with regards to nutrition, economy, and social cohesion. Yet there are very few food waste composting programs in the country, and the inability to clearly identify the benefits to many sectors is one reason why. From the perspective of both government and non-profit foundations, a project that accomplishes multiple positive endpoints is ideal. But existing accountability mechanisms favor projects with a more limited set of benefits because it is easier to quantify and communicate them.

Recommendations to ensure the strength of community action

If this article has been persuasive in noting the value of multiple-outcome, community-based projects, then it is worthwhile to consider recommendations for enhancing such projects. This list is intended to promote discussion and is probably incomplete.

Focus on results but have a fair process

Different communities undertake improvements using different tools and rules. Evaluation and the ability to revise strategies when success is not occurring at the desired rate are essential.

Any shift from government authorities to local responsibility must keep the foundation of fairness that is largely required in government programs.

Celebrate success at the local level

We have accomplished a great deal of success in our society as the result of government, business, neighborhoods, families, schools, the military, and other institutions established for public good. There is not yet a consistent recognition of the successes that have and will continue to occur through cooperative efforts. Celebration of success will highlight the value of new community projects and strengthen the overall movement toward greater use of local decision making and resources.

Acknowledge the limits of centralized authority but quit bashing government

Many Americans hold state and federal government in disdain for taking too large a role in our lives. The increased size of government is a direct result of the policy goals that we, as a democratic society, have requested. It may be time to get centralized government away from certain programs, but only when local efforts are ready to step in.

Acknowledge the capabilities and limits of community action

We live in a global society. Some actions we pursue may contribute to resolving regional, national, and international conditions. However, in some cases community-level actions may not be able to overcome global trends. For issues such as climate change, species extinction, and international drug trafficking, the solution may not lie at the community level. Planning where best to expend local efforts and energy requires a balance among needs, interests, and abilities. Each community is unique, but the will to promote change must come from many sources.

In conclusion

For several decades the National Civic League has reminded us that local action is a key to building strong communities. It is now time to expand that message and promote local action to build strong states and a strong country. A strong nation is more than the sum of strong communities. Increased communication, mobility, and commerce link our communities in a sometimes-tenuous web. Only when each community acts to ensure a healthy environment, a healthy population, and a healthy economy will the web be sufficient to meet our societal goals.

The need for greater action at the local level is changing the ways in which community projects are perceived. While civic organizations will continue to play a vital role in communities, future projects will require moving beyond simply handing over large cardboard checks to the hospital or library. These new projects will need critical review from our news media and require difficult decisions regarding taxes and budgets. When community projects receive the same level of criticism and debate that issues like school budgets and new development decisions do, we will have been successful in utilizing the tool of Healthy Communities.

Ken Jones and Jennifer Colby, Green Mountain Institute for Environmental Democracy