

planning at the grass roots level: the guilford county citizen participation program

Historically, local governments in this country have focused their programs and priorities almost exclusively on urban areas, where population, resources, and problems are most concentrated. Rural dwellers, by contrast, have been avoided by planners and other officials, their needs being left to such rural-oriented agencies as the Agricultural Extension Service. In the late summer of 1973, Guilford County Government and its citizens broke that tradition. Stimulated primarily by the need to dampen citizen dissatisfaction with land use regulations, the County Government set out to organize the citizens of its rural and suburban areas around community defined issues and problems. What has resulted is a community organization directly involving the citizens of Guilford County. Among their accomplishments to date have been the

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formation of a summer recreation program, a rural garbage collection study, a rural-suburban land use committee, and a citizen's budget committee.

Prior to this effort, “citizen input” into the planning process of Guilford County came only through such conventional arrangements as public hearings on specific proposals, routine board or commission meetings, political representation, or the electoral process. As it was implemented in 1973, the “Community Councils Program” was a significant departure from this norm, because, one, it was non-urban in focus; two, its base was grass-roots community organization rather than individually oriented; and three, it attempted to involve organized county residents early in the planning stages of both short and long-range governmental decisions. Moreover, as a form of decentralization of political power toward the “county-wide” community and toward the local communities, its conceptualization and

practice were a far cry from the rubber-stamp public hearing, the hand-picked board or commission, or the infrequent ritual of selecting remote decision-makers through the electoral process.

origins

As early as 1969, the county was engaged in a public information program to counteract rural opposition to zoning and subdivision regulations. This effort led to the alliance of governmental officials who later sponsored the 1973 program. Since the 1969 initiative was much more conservative than its successor, a brief examination of its features may provide the basis for an evaluation of the conceptual growth that eventually made the 1973 program possible.

The 1969 program was sponsored by those governmental bodies most affected by rural dissatisfaction with land use controls. Planners and inspectors on one hand, were motivated by a desire to convince the public of the benevolence of land use controls in order to dampen the hostility that frequently impeded the course of their routine duties. Commissioners, whose public meetings were sometimes disrupted by angry rural citizens demanding repeal of zoning and subdivision regulations, wanted political peace restored. The Agricultural Extension Service sought to prevent rural discontent from expanding into a general hostility against county government, which could conceivably threaten the standing of the Extension program among its traditional clientele. All these officials were convinced that the controversial regulations were in the public interest and should be maintained.

Essentially, the program consisted of a series of

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special "educational" citizens' meetings held under the aegis of the Extension Agent, who, it was presumed, still retained the trust of rural citizens and could convincingly claim neutrality in the controversy. Officials lectured the public on the benefits of zoning and subdivision regulations and attempted to win their support for them. This approach appeared to be successful (rural opposition did recede slightly after the meetings), and thereafter, county officials tended to perceive citizen participation in terms of educational output from government to citizens, tailored to serve governmental objectives.

Thus, in 1971, when the Planning Department included a citizen participation element in its 701 Comprehensive Planning Assistance work program, the primary intention was to educate the public about planning and zoning matters. The 1971 program design, when completed, however, differed from the scheme proposed in the 701 application. Due in part to the influence of the Extension Service (the program scope was broadened) calling for sponsorship by Guilford County government as a whole. The basic notion behind the expansion was that *all* of county government - particularly those line agencies engaged in service delivery - could benefit from the opportunity to provide information to citizens. The potential usefulness of selective citizen feedback was also recognized. For instance, the Planning Department envisaged using citizen participation to solicit general ideas about long-range planning policies, but had not considered the possibility of citizen input into all phases of the comprehensive planning process (such as ordinance writing, zoning and subdivision decisions, capital programming, etc.).



Leadership training is being conducted with the help of A & T University

Courtesy of Department of Natural and Economic Resources

Still, the 1971 design was not based on community organization. Instead, it proposed the establishment of a citizens' advisory board composed partly of representatives from countywide organizations (County PTA Council, Farm Bureau, Boy and Girl Scouts Councils, NAACP, Audubon Society, the executive committees of the two major political parties, etc.) and partly of members representing individual local communities. It was thought such a structure would yield an adequate breadth of representation through (a) the existing electoral system of the countywide organizations and their local member clubs or units; and (b) the proposed identification and selection of individual community leaders who would be capable of reflecting the viewpoints of their neighbors.

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The citizens' advisory board was to function as a forum for information from county department heads, and for responses by citizens to the appropriate county officials. It might also sponsor a series of informational seminars around the county on various subjects requiring exposure. The key to the success of such an approach, planners reasoned, was a commitment from county department heads to use the program for information output and to be hospitable to the response generated by the citizens' board.

This program design was endorsed by the county manager, the Board of County Commissioners, and the affected county department heads during late 1971 and early 1972. At this time the Planning Department and the Extension Service became co-sponsors, devoting staff resources to implementing the program; despite the theoretical involvement of all county line agencies.

Throughout 1972, attempts were made to launch the program as designed. Several meetings were held with representatives of countywide organizations, who expressed an interest in pursuing the program. However, it proved difficult to identify and contact the community leaders who, according to the design, were to make up the balance of the advisory board.

The dilemma of community representation caused planners and extension agents to re-think the whole program design. With the influence of the Extension Service, the emphasis soon shifted from a "countywide" advisory board to community organization throughout the county. Community organization, as a component of educationally oriented community development, was consistent with the traditional mission of the Extension Service.

Planners saw its potential for achieving representation, and moreover, their active participation.

Thus, the program was cast into an entirely new mold. The fundamental unit of the citizen participation program would now be the Local Community Council representing the residents of the several recognizable neighborhoods and communities in rural and suburban Guilford County. Each Local Community Council would elect a representative to the countywide body, to be known as the Countywide Community Council. This group, while retaining in its membership the officials of countywide organizations as before, would now undertake to place in comprehensive perspective the issues defined at the local level. The county government officials involved in the program would advise and assist the Countywide Community Council and use it as the contact point for public information initiatives.

Overhaul of the program design had moved the focus from a countywide level to the level of the individual community. It could be foreseen that, to the extent community organization succeeded, county government would be less likely to influence its outcomes than it might have been under the original scheme. If this loss of power was perceived, none of the governmental officials viewed it as a matter of concern at the time. Perhaps they were too immersed in the mechanics of re-design to anticipate its consequences. The issue would arise at a later date, however.

Staff time devoted to re-thinking the program had left little leeway for actual implementation. The program stalled under the pressure of other responsibilities, and by early 1973 it had come to a virtual standstill.

implementation

In May of 1973 the Planning Department employed a first-year student from the Department of City and Regional Planning, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, as a summer intern. He was given the responsibility for reviewing the citizen participation program design, recommending changes, and devising an implementation strategy. For the first time, the program was raised from the level of an incidental responsibility of two overworked agencies to the status of a functional project with full-time, undistracted staff attention.

After conferring closely with all the governmental officials and attempting to fashion the program in such a way as to suit as many of their varied interests and desires as possible a scheme was constructed similar to the 1972 community organization plan, but with a number of important conceptual differences:

- (1) Collaborative citizen-government interaction had replaced government information output and citizen response input as the most dominant potential mode of participation;
- (2) Participation would be defined and practiced by the citizens themselves: Local communities should organize according to whatever structure they preferred, should choose their own areas of interest, and should act publicly as

they felt appropriate;

- (3) The role of county government should be confined to promoting and facilitating the concept of meaningful participation, responding to citizen desires revealed by the process, and utilizing the process for collaborative public decision-making and information output.

These features were not so much explicit in the new program design as they were inevitably derivative from the strategy proposed to be employed in the organizing process. In this sense it might be said that planners had a hidden agenda for the establishment of a much more open participatory arrangement than some of the other governmental officials might have preferred to see.

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Yet this agenda was not so hidden as to be indistinguishable. Other governmental officials, notably the county manager, not only perceived it but seemed to concur. The Board of County Commissioners seemed attracted to three principal features of the program: (a) its potential for increasing their voter appeal through an appearance of governmental responsiveness; (b) its potential for dispersing responsibility for controversial decision-making; and (c) its potential for testing the public pulse. Neither then nor later did they protest seriously against loss of political power, even when the participatory arrangement they had sanctioned in fact demonstrated its ability to change the course of public policy. Only the Extension Service expressed doubts about the openness of the proposed program, but the argument was not pressed.

The avowed purposes of the 1973 program are fourfold:

- (1) To provide a means for continuing free and open communication between county government and the citizenry;
- (2) To involve citizens in public decision-making;
- (3) To provide a community-based organizational structure that would allow citizens to examine and address their local problems or call them to the attention of the appropriate local government agency; and
- (4) To establish a representative citizen organization at the county level (the old Countywide Council, now called the Rural-Suburban Community Council) to provide a participation

vehicle for issues of countywide concern.

If few of the governmental officials could embrace this whole array of stated objectives, all of them could feel comfortable with at least one or two; therefore, a balance of interests was achieved. Perhaps for this reason, disputes over the various "agendas" were rare except on the part of the Extension Service, which remained suspicious of the collaborative interaction feature and its potential for conflict.

At midsummer, after completion of the program design, a slide-tape show was prepared by the intern and the planning staff, with the assistance of the Extension Service. It explained the program structure, the benefits and opportunities of community organization, and the commitment of the county government to responsiveness. The presentation was to be used in the field during the community organization process. With the approval of the program design and slide-tape show by Commissioners in late summer, implementation was at hand.

A basic issue - geographical coverage - had been resolved as early as 1971: The citizen participation effort, at least initially, would be aimed at Guilford County citizens who resided outside the corporate limits of municipalities. While the city officials of Greensboro, High Point, Jamestown and Gibsonville would be informed of the program and perhaps even become involved on specific matters of intergovernmental relations raised by the citizens, the county would not engage in community organization within the cities. Although county

government provided health and welfare services to municipal residents and collected taxes from them, it was thought the bulk of the issues concerning city residents lay within the jurisdiction of their municipal governments. Furthermore, the inter-governmental complications inevitably arising from county-sponsored citizen action in cities could easily be foreseen. Despite this decision, the program design was sufficiently open-ended to permit eventual participation by city residents when circumstances might require their input. Indeed, within a year a Local Community Council was organized whose membership included both city and county residents.

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At the outset, however, the program was confined to the unincorporated area of Guilford County (approximately 500 square miles) and its 81,000 people. The goal was to provide a representative organizational structure for everyone in rural and suburban Guilford County.

operation

To convey an accurate idea of how target communities were selected and approached, it is useful to review the operation of the community organization phase.

A number of rural communities could be readily identified by virtue of physical and historical identity. With the assistance of Extension agents, planners could also define other less immediately visible communities on the basis of social or economic identity. This process was largely subjective and perceptual: Adjustments would be made later, when, in the early stages of organization, the citizens themselves would define community boundaries through cognitive mapping.

The initial organizing effort was made in a well-defined residential community of Pleasant Garden in southern Guilford County. One year later there were eight organized communities, and as of March, 1976, there were fifteen. It is anticipated that, when the organizing process is completed, the program will involve twenty-two communities.

During the fall of 1973 the Mental Health Division of the County Health Department became the third governmental co-sponsor of the program. This commitment, prompted by citizen participation requirements of federal funding for mental health, resulted in the addition of a Mental Health staff person to community organization. Also, the Extension Service provided a part-time staffer to supervise the preparation, printing, and distribution of a monthly newsletter which was circulated among all Local Community Councils and governmental actors.



Guilford County has strongly encouraged its rural residents to participate in the planning process

Courtesy of the Soil Conservation Service

By early 1974, the program, while proceeding satisfactorily in the field, had begun to encounter administrative difficulties. Only the Planning Department's coordinator was assigned to the program full-time. The Mental Health staffer, while physically located in the Planning Department, was paid by Mental Health and owed that department a percentage of time for other duties. The newsletter was, as we have seen, a function of the Extension Service. Thus, no responsible county official had the whole scope of the program under his span of supervision. While salary costs were known, operating expenses could not be tracked since expenditures for reproduction, typing, and supplies were charged to the regular operating budgets of the three departments. Though it was estimated in mid-1974 that the program was costing \$30,000 a year, no one knew the actual cost. Such circumstances precluded effective management and program evaluation; they also provided an opportunity for friction between the administrators of the three sponsoring agencies.

The Mental Health Center shared the Planning Department's interest in maintaining an open, collaborative citizen participation arrangement. But the Extension Service, which viewed participation as a more controlled mechanism for citizen education, community development, and leadership training, had become increasingly uncomfortable with the notion of "citizen power" implicit in the program operation. This dissatisfaction grew sufficiently strong to threaten the unity of program sponsorship.

The Planning Director had been convinced from the outset that the program belonged under the immediate supervision of the county manager, who alone had administrative authority over all county agencies involved in its activities. The explicit concerns of the Extension Service provided an opportunity for taking the related issues of program philosophy and administration to the manager for resolution. After a period of study, the program was transferred to the Guilford County Administration in early 1975. It will be remembered that the participatory concept espoused by the county manager was one of openness and citizen power.

Space limitations prevent a comprehensive accounting of all activities undertaken by the citizens of Guilford County since the inception of the Community Councils Program. However, it is possible to list some of the major initiatives sponsored by the Rural-Suburban Community Council which will reflect the countywide perspective achieved by the program:¹

- (1) The 1974 Recreation Pilot Program - This effort featured citizen committees in each Local Community Council area which identified program and equipment needs, set priorities for program planning and equipment purchase, and took a hand in personnel selection.
- (2) The Ad Hoc Study Commission on Recreation - Recommended by the Rural-Suburban Community Council and appointed by county



Courtesy of Department of Natural and Economic Resources

The Rural-Suburban Community Council organized citizen committees to identify area recreation needs

commissioners, this body conducted public meetings in the four quadrants of unincorporated Guilford County to examine recreation needs and circulated questionnaires with the help of the Community Councils Program staff.

- (3) The 1975 Summer Recreation Program - This program, a direct outgrowth of the initiatives outlined above, will involve 25 playground sites and \$80,000 (three times as many sites and five times as much money as the 1974 pilot program) and will again utilize the Local Community Councils for program design.
- (4) The Rural Garbage Collection Study - The Rural-Suburban Community Council administered preparation and distribution of a questionnaire designed to identify citizen needs in rural garbage collection.
- (5) The Rural-Suburban Dialogue - This effort, funded by a grant from the North Carolina Committee on Continuing Education in the Humanities, resulted in a seven-week series of community meetings designed to explore the topic of public education. Dialogues were planned by a steering committee made up of citizens from each Local Community Council.
- (6) The Education Committee - Composed of hold-overs from the Dialogue Steering Committee and volunteers who became interested in the dialogues, this committee identified county education issues and outlined strategies for improvement. This committee cooperated with the Gateways Task Force on Secondary and Elementary Education to discuss issues common to city and county schools.

- (7) The Rural-Suburban Land Use Committee - This group engaged in collaborative exchange with the Planning Department in the revision of the Guilford County Land Use Plan. The Planning Department also visited individual Local Community Councils to solicit input. At the request of this committee, the Rural-Suburban Community Council formally asked the county for \$50,000 to be used for legal aid to citizens filing suit against the county for environmental violations.
- (8) The Citizen's Budget Committee - This committee, made up of interested citizens from each Local Community Council, gathered citizen input concerning needs and quality of service, assigned priorities, and influenced the county budget-making process for FY 1975-76. It had the cooperation of the county manager and budget officer.

evaluation

The community councils coordinator who, as a summer intern, fashioned and implemented the Guilford County citizen participation program, identified eight major areas of accomplishment after almost two years of operation:²

- (1) Needs are being identified and pursued by citizens.
- (2) Agencies are spending time and effort in receiving organized citizen input.
- (3) Citizens are expecting to be taken into account more meaningfully.
- (4) The shortcomings of elitist, closed-door planning are being recognized by citizens, with the result that they are more strongly motivated to participate.
- (5) Some of the short-range needs identified by Local Community Councils are being fulfilled.
- (6) Leadership training is being conducted with the help of A & T State University.

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- (7) Educational needs defined by local communities are being answered by the appropriate government officials in such areas as airport planning, social security administration, formulation of wills, budgeting, land use, mental health, drug abuse and law enforcement.
 - (8) Intra-community communication is being enhanced by the Community Councils Program newsletter, which now reaches approximately 1400 people.
- Measured against a standard of normative perfection, this is not an instance of radical community

control. But in the context of common participatory practice, especially for rural areas, the program appears legitimately collaborative. If the validity of participatory forms must be measured by the extent to which citizens *control* the public decision-making process in some direct fashion, then in fact the Guilford County program is invalid. But if, on the

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other hand, validity is determined by the disposition of institutions to recognize and be influenced by organized citizen opinion, then the ideal participatory mode becomes a cooperative one, in which *joint* policy-making is possible. Viewed from this perspective, the Guilford County program is potentially valid.

Relinquishment of institutional and political power was implicit in the community organization scheme. Yet it can be argued that power, if unused, does not exist: The most profound test of the program's validity is the willingness of the organized citizenry to accept and use the power implicitly relinquished. If used, this power may even be increased, since the institutional and political system may now be susceptible to even further change by virtue of the uncertainty arising from the marginal power transfer it has already undergone. The relative power roles of citizens and institutions are yet to be determined, but now the initiative seems to lie with the citizens.

This viewpoint rests on the assumption that the motives of all the governmental officials engaged in the program add up to institutional responsiveness of an authentic sort. Manifestly, individual motives were and are not uniform. Yet, because of the uniquely multi-faceted character of the program's objectives, county officials have been able to perceive it in a number of ways. It serves a narrow purpose for one agency, a large purpose for another. Yet, by acknowledging the participatory process at all, they become susceptible to an increase of citizen influence, because that influence is a fundamental element of the program design. The design is such that institutional responsiveness may come about through inadvertance. The major ingredient is the aggressive and imaginative use by citizens of the power offered them by community organization.

There is evidence to suggest that elected and administrative officials of county government now regard the Community Councils Program as an influential force that must be taken into account in public decision-making of significance. The establishment of a county recreation program was a direct result of concerted citizen action; it



The fundamental unit of the citizen participation program is the Local Community Council

Courtesy of Department of Natural and Economic Resources

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demonstrated that the Community Councils Program could in fact force the Board of County Commissioners to reverse a policy commitment. Citizens have been directly involved in the land use planning process and provided input into the FY 1975-76 county budget. Citizens are also actively engaged in strengthening their local communities and addressing their local problems. Some of these activities may be dismissed as cooptation or ritualism or neighborhood parochialism, but in at least one instance, the recreation program citizens have proved themselves capable of showing muscle on an issue that mattered.

In “selling” the community organization concept to a target citizen audience, county organizers stress the potency of a unified, representative citizen influence on institutions as opposed to random individual contacts. This is in fact an argument for political power. If consensus on a public issue can be developed within the network of Local Community Councils (as occurred with the recreation question), the Rural-Suburban Community Council can approach the Board of County Commissioners and

legitimately claim to represent the sentiments of several thousand citizens on that issue. Thus, the pressure they bring to bear on decision-makers is clearly political.

The Community Councils Program can exert sufficient political power on elected officials to cause a reassessment and reversal of public policy; but it should be remembered that - once a new policy direction has been forced - the planning and implementation of programs becomes a *collaborative* process involving citizens, elected officials, and public administrators. This was the model followed in the development of the County Recreation Program, and it appears to be a practical model for citizen participation.

Footnotes

¹Paraphrased from a letter to the writer from Rex H. Todd, Guilford County Community Councils Coordinator, dated March, 12, 1975.

²*Ibid.*