

Building Rural Officials' Capacity

Circuit Riders and Technical Assistance

Recognition is growing in the literature of the last decade that rural local government is being left behind and sorely needs help. City government has full-time employees and has usually been able to evolve to match the growing complexity of both society and the political system. On the other hand, rural local officials are mostly part-time people with other full-time jobs. Their pay is usually in the lower four figures for twenty hours a week or more of effort. It's no wonder then that small communities are found to lack the ability to anticipate potential problems and take preventive action. They are often crisis oriented because their elected officials can just barely keep up, let alone look ahead. And when they do foresee problems they often do not know where to turn for needed information and consulting help.

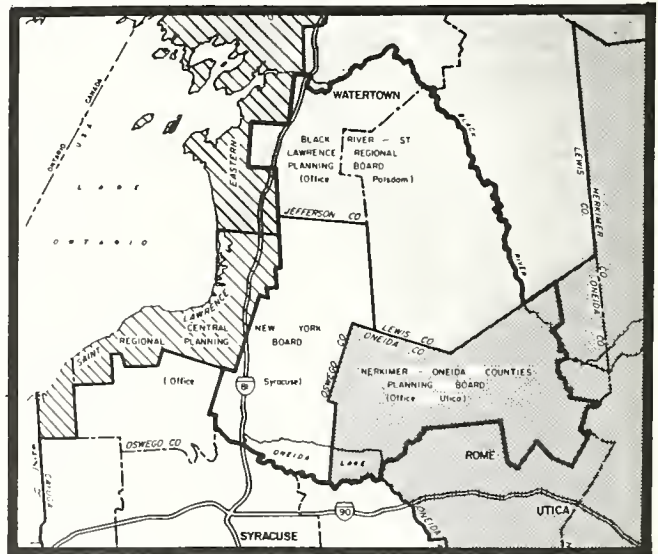
Commitment by state governments to providing technical assistance to local governments has had its ups and downs over the past twenty years. Fueled by Federal money (e.g., HUD 701 and I.P.A.), attempts to organize a field network and support staff to aid local government have sometimes been elaborate. Sometimes these state level local assistance agencies have proven unstable, experiencing cutback and reorganization with change in administration. The level and nature of existing programs enhancing the capacity of small local governments has become insufficient to meet the need. In New York State the Division of Local Government and Community Services exists within the Department of State, a cadre of highly competent dedicated experts in local government matters. This unit

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serves very effectively as a resource that is tapped through training, publications, and conferences. Division staff conduct model studies that can be used by others in a way that will enable local officials to carry on after the experts leave. What they cannot provide is a regular direct link with local officials, so help can be provided on day-to-day problems or long-term continuing efforts. Other states are in a similar condition, but there have been some excitingly successful methods piloted here and there that demonstrate how to provide the missing link.

According to Honadle (1981) in Capacity-Building for Local Governments: An Annotated

Bibliography, the term "capacity building" in domestic policy circles has been around since the early seventies. Honadle defines it as "...improving the ability of local communities to deal with their problems. It means helping communities anticipate, influence, or direct change; attract and absorb resources; make deci-



Regional planning boards serving the Tug Hill

sions about policy; manage physical, human, and informational resources; and evaluate the results of such activities." Inherent in the literature on capacity building is an emphasis on small communities, where the need is greatest, on decentralized decision-making, and on helping local officials help themselves -- a "bottom up" rather than the "top down" approach to federal/state relations with local government.

Ways of providing technical support to towns and counties have been around for a long time. The National Association of Towns and Townships has been in business since 1963 and the National Association of Counties since 1935. In 1959 New York and Alaska were the first to form state agencies on local or community affairs. By 1970, some 25 states had established such offices, and by 1978 virtually every state had done so. For example, in 1975, newly-elec-

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ted Governor Carey abolished the Office of Local Government (OLG) and the Office of Planning Services (OPS), merging their functions into the Department of State and greatly cutting back field offices and representation.

Similar histories of rise and decline have occurred in other states. In 1980 Wisconsin's Department of Local Affairs and Development (DLAD) went out of existence, and its functions merged with business development into a Department of Development. Again, it was a newly-elected Governor who applied the coup-de-grace. Hagensick and Rasmussen, writing in the December 1981 National Civic Review, listed three factors which they feel contributed to DLAD's demise: lack of clear and consistent operational mandates, lack of effective clientele relationships, and lack of indispensability.

In spite of the erratic organizational history of state programs to assist local government, a number of approaches and techniques have proven effective. The idea of shared experts and circuit riding town managers has been around at least since the 1960's. By 1975, interest had grown to the extent that a two-and-one-half day workshop held in Tennessee drew over 80 people from more than 20 states. Today the circuit rider should be viewed as one who makes a personal and regular connection with leaders of a group of communities in order to provide information and resources needed to solve problems and make decisions. This person is concerned with building capacity rather than taking over the job of management.

Circuit Riding The Tug Hill Area of N.Y. State

In 1973, when special area commissions were in vogue in New York State, the Temporary State Commission on Tug Hill was formed. Other state commissions in the Adirondacks, the Cat-

skills, and the Hudson Valley were formed because of strong statewide interests in those areas. These interests sometimes carried with them expectations on the part of people living outside the area that were not necessarily shared by residents. The Tug Hill area, 2000 square miles in parts of four counties, was generally unknown when the Tug Hill Commission was formed. Tucked in between Lake Ontario on the west, and overshadowed by the Adirondack Park on the east, the commission was created due to concerns of local people and had no broad outside constituency. All nine commission members were local residents and served as volunteers. The stimulus for its formation was a developer's option to buy a large portion of the wilderness core of Tug Hill, perceived by local residents as a threat that would cause undesirable change.

When the commission members first met in April 1973, they decided that they were most interested in learning what future for the area was desired by local people. With advice from

AN INVESTMENT IN TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND IN PERSON-TO-PERSON HELP OF A CIRCUIT RIDER IS A SMALL PRICE TO PAY FOR EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

Cooperative Extension and Cornell's community resource development people, four steering committees composed mostly of local officials were formed to help plan a series of public forums. The public came out in droves to the eight forums and told the commission that they were concerned about the future, but that they did not want the state to plan for the area. Rather they would do it themselves.

The findings of the commission, published in early 1976, called for local cooperative planning boards, one of which had already been formed and tested, with all power remaining at the individual town level. The commission would provide planning assistance with no strings at-



Peaceful scene in the heart of the Tug Hill region

Riding the Southern Circuit

Ben Coe's description of circuit riders in upstate New York has its counterparts in the Southeast. Daniel Wanamaker, in a 1977 paper about circuit riders in the U.S. which was presented at the National Association of Regional Councils Conference, noted that the idea of using roving local government experts has been attempted in Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, West Virginia, and Virginia.

An informal survey of North Carolina public agencies indicates that technical assistance to local governments is not often provided by circuit riders. However, examples of persons who as Coe describes, "build the capacity" of local government officials to solve their communities' problems, are found within the state Office of Coastal Management and the Community Assistance Division of the Department of Natural Resources and Community Development (NRCD), and among North Carolina's Councils of Government. Undoubtedly there are other examples.

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tached. Formation of a technical assistance service that would solve problems for town and village officials as requested was also recommended.

This was the beginning of a program which today reports the following progress:

- Four cooperative planning boards and one council of governments, with membership ranging from three to 18 municipalities, each served by a part-time or full-time circuit rider.
- Of the 39 towns and 20 villages in the Tug Hill study area, only eight towns and nine villages have not yet been involved with land use planning programs. In the eleven-town Cooperative Tug Hill Planning Board, a circuit rider provides regular support to five enforcement officers covering seven communities.
- Training sessions attended by town supervisors, councilmen, highway superintendents, and planning board members on subjects such as simplified double-entry accounting, town budgeting, and investment pooling.
- Education program plan developed for the "Tug Hill Aquifer," a critical underground water supply serving three coun-

lina office, he aids local officials in the state's 20 coastal counties in the development of land use plans required under the 1974 North Carolina Coastal Areas Management Act (CAMA). Crew is also involved with the current disaster planning effort of the OCM: he works with local governments to bring their disaster plans in line with current CAMA regulations.

The Division of Community Assistance of NRCD provides technical assistance to local governments through four major programs; the largest of which, both in terms of funding support and local governments served, is its community development technical assistance program. Under this program, any city or county needing assistance in land use, community development, or public management may contact a regional office of the Division of Community Assistance. Examples of services provided, free of charge, include preparation of zoning ordinances and subdivision

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ties. The Salmon Rivers Cooperative Planning Board/Conservation Advisory Council, assisted by their circuit rider, will coordinate the citizen education effort and the management strategy discussions.

In addition the commission conducts research projects on questions, needs, and issues that affect the area as a whole. Subjects being covered at this time include new opportunities in agriculture, a survey of feelings about the acid rain issue, and a look at the economic and environmental aspects of several new approaches to forest harvesting.

The acid test of the Tug Hill program came in April 1981. Cooperative Extension at Cornell was asked to conduct workshops for local leaders, without the commission staff present, in order to determine how the leaders felt about the commission's past performance, whether or not the work should continue, and if so what form it should take. Over 90 percent of the 125 participants felt that programs should continue, and that all the elements of the program were important to their communities and the area as a whole. A 36-member steering committee was then appointed to make specific recommendations to the Governor and the Legislature. The result was that in the summer of 1981, Governor Hugh Carey proposed legislation to extend the program for five years. Led by local state legislators, the bill passed with few dissenters. This ex-

regulations, assistance to local officials in the development of budgets, and preparation of local grant applications.

In the past, regional staff were assigned specific portions of work weeks on a contractual basis to provide this technical assistance in local communities. Some of this work was done with HUD 701 funds. Today this is no longer technically a circuit rider program, as staff do not have the same constant personal contact with local government officials.

Executive Director Lindsay Cox of the Piedmont Triad Council of Governments notes that his COG has been providing technical assistance for nearly 10 years. Two years ago the staff tried the circuit rider approach for provision of this assistance, and staff services were contracted out on a daily or monthly basis. Piedmont Triad's circuit riding program was unique among the state's Councils of Governments, said Cox. The circuit riders attended meetings of local planning boards, revised ordinances, prepared annexation studies, evaluated city codes and charges for inspections, and made preliminary studies for Community Development Block Grant revitalization.

Despite this high level of activity, Cox noted that the circuit rider program "didn't work as well as we'd hoped", partially because experience is in sharp contrast to the fate of some of the state-level local government service agencies like DLAD in Wisconsin.

Some of the more subtle aspects of setting up effective circuit rider/technical assistance programs are noted below:

- The person hired for circuit rider or technical assistance work is all-important. That person must be one who is willing to enable others to make decisions or take action; must have the pursuit and persistence to see that information needed is obtained and delivered; and must like working with people and be willing to work any time of day.
- The circuit rider needs technical support from other sources. The technical assistance service located at the Tug Hill office fills this role. In turn, that office finds it very important to turn to other resources with more specialized knowledge.
- A circuit rider needs someone to talk to; it's lonely out there! For this reason, the Tug Hill Commission has set up a team for each sub-area program. Each team meets on a regular basis to discuss problems in the field and how to overcome them.

the circuit rider requests came in spurts. Today Piedmont Triad COG still provides assistance to local planning boards, and staff members serve somewhat of a circuit riding function when they are requested to do so by local governments. This COG is currently preparing to contract with a local government to provide a circuit rider.

Although provision of technical assistance is widespread, the Western Piedmont COG in Hickory makes intensive use of this method of local government aid. Two of this COG's staff could be termed "circuit riding planners", according to Executive Director Doug Taylor. These people contract with five local governments for one or two days of services per week, such as annexation studies and transportation planning. The Western Piedmont COG remains one of the few that provide circuit riding planners. Taylor noted that other North Carolina COGs provide similar services, but not at the same level: 27 percent of Western Piedmont's current budget goes for such contracted services.

"We only provide circuit riding assistance if the city or county wants it, and doesn't want to hire full time staff," explained Taylor. Some of the communities this COG has serviced have recognized their increased effectiveness with greater technical assistance, and have gone on to hire their own full time planners.

- A system is needed to log in and file for future access each technical assistance request and response. Access to past efforts is important, since many times similar requests will come from different communities.

The commissions's "capacity building" efforts are not just directed at building management skills. Just as important is the regular provision of information, sometimes with analysis, sometimes with training in its use. This kind of personal, reliable resource is vital if part-time officials are to make informed decisions. The response to commission programs has demonstrated a long term continuing need for circuit riders who utilize a variety of technical assistance services and other resources.

Anthony Brown, in the January/February 1980 Public Administration Review calls for a community-wide approach to local government capacity building rather than a problem-specific perspective, and a continuing and intimate relationship between the source of assistance and the recipient. Brown notes that education is as important as action in helping a community solve its problems, and that capacity building involves a greater degree of risk-taking and investment of resources in low-visibility, 'soft' programs by the technical assistance agency than is presently required under the traditional approach.

A Proposal to Apply the Tug Hill Experience More Widely

The literature of the last five or six years describes a growing need for technical assistance to rural local officials and the strengths and weaknesses of past efforts to meet the need. The experience of the Tug Hill Commission confirms that need in rural New York State and identifies some new elements that should be added to augment existing state services. A primary new ingredient is the circuit rider, the personal link between the communities and the information, training, and consulting resources. There is a workable, affordable way for a state to enhance its capacity building program for rural local governments:

1. Within a local government service department establish a separate division to provide assistance to small communities. Include a capability to connect with all kinds of assistance, including fiscal, planning, and legal assistance. Local government assistance must be service-oriented and, at times it should be an advocate for the local government or rural viewpoint. Functions such as state planning, on the other hand, must advocate statewide interests. The two conflict and should not be combined.
2. The division should not build its own network of state employees to "ride the circuit." Rather, the state should provide partial support to groups of communities, counties or groups of counties so that they may establish offices of town and village assistance. Another way would be to scale up the Tug Hill approach by financing a network of independent state commissions which would be governed by boards of appointed volunteers who live in the areas served. The disadvantage of this approach, however, is that it sets up additional governmental structures that might seem threatening to existing ones. The state level division or office would include a section that would help organize and finance local assistance programs, and another section that would provide strong technical backup from a central or regional office.
3. The state would provide a share of the financing for these local, independent or quasi-independent technical assistance organizations. The Tug Hill Commission has tested several approaches to financing the circuit rider function and has found that small communities by themselves cannot afford the kind of services needed. The amount of local contribution per municipality to circuit rider program budgets in Tug Hill has ranged from a low of \$200 (where there is also a county contribution) to as high as \$1500. The amount depends somewhat on size of the municipal budget.



Tug Hill Commission circuit rider confers about budget item with a town supervisor.

Elizabeth Marsh, in Cooperative Rural Planning: a Tug Hill Case Study, brings in a second point of view:

"What the circuit rider does is raise the capabilities of very small governments to a point where they can begin to compete on equal terms with larger cities and towns... An investment with county or state funds in technical assistance and in the person-to-person help of a circuit rider is a small price to pay for equal opportunity for small places. The advocates for rural America should lobby for such services."

Conclusion

Part-time officials of small communities need technical assistance. Past failures and successes of technical assistance programs have been discussed in this paper. An approach to state programming has been proposed that may be able to build local government capabilities to the net benefit of the taxpayer. If properly implemented, this approach should be able to gain and retain constituent support, insulating it from political change at the top. More information from other states should be gathered in order to develop effective local assistance programs. Among the important principles to follow is that local assistance must be responsive, independent, and separated from state level agendas. Its leadership must have faith that, given information and dialogue, more effective and efficient local government will usually result.

This article is an excerpt from Coe's presentation to the 1982 Region I/II Conference of the American Society for Public Administration.