

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.