

City and County Management As Community Building

John Nalbandian and James Oliver

The phrase “community building” captures those initiatives in local governments today that seek to connect the places where people live with the lives they lead. The goal of community building is to create attachment to the community, identity, and pride. Most people realize that the selfish pursuit of individual interests, the increase of diversity, and the longtime trend of development patterns leading to urban sprawl have produced serious conditions of disconnectedness among our various populations.

Often, these forces have produced the most ambiguous yet most serious challenges that face local governments. Bearing this in mind, this article addresses how community building and local government management are, and indeed need to be, related.

Trends

Based on a series of interviews conducted by coauthor John Nalbandian over the past 10 years, it seems obvious that the emerging role of the profession is part management and part leadership. Local government managers still must do the work of management, including organizing tasks, setting timelines, and allocating resources. But today’s manager must be almost equally adept at leading the council and community to and through the messy processes that build

visions—concerned all the while with equity and balanced participation as well as with outcomes.

The research uncovered these trends:¹

- Community building has become part of the local government management professional's responsibility.
- Managers are expected to facilitate participation and representation and to develop partnerships.
- There is less adherence to council-manager government as the "one best form."
- The manager's internal administrative role has become more process-oriented.

Karma Ruder, director of the neighborhood planning office in Seattle and a former staff person in Phoenix and in Billings, Montana, writes, "Who is doing the work that makes people respect their governments and become committed to making life in their communities better? The crucial issue is how local governments stay legitimate in the eyes of those they serve."

Eric Anderson, city manager of Des Moines, Iowa, writes, "I am increasingly convinced that we are accountable for more than the quality of our management. We also are accountable for how well we have performed in the governance of our communities. Our jobs are to assure a fundamentally productive combination of the two [politics and administration] in the daily life of local governments. We need to be more specific about the responsibility we carry for governance as well as service delivery."

In common, Ruder and Anderson express the need to search for ways to build among residents a sense of obligation to community interests and to convince them that their private and economic well-being is not the only measure of what is good.²

What we really want from citizens is an understanding that for their communities to prosper:

Government can create public spaces where people can gather and, through their interaction, build a common identity.

- Some individual decisions will have to be subject to majority rule.
- Some individual interests will have to be weighed collectively against an array of interests.

The Foundation

How do we encourage this kind of collective, or public-minded, perspective among residents? There are three kinds of actions that form the foundation of community building. First, provide goods, services, and facilities for residents more efficiently than they could get them if they had to produce or purchase them individually. Examples include clean water, sanitary and storm-water sewer systems, parks, public education, a transportation system, and so on.

Second, provide these public goods in a manner that respects the fundamental democratic values of representation, equity (equal protection), and individual rights (due process).

Third, encourage residents to act like citizens in charge, rather than subjects, of government. As Anderson remarks, "We have a strong responsibility to make sure that we not only provide information to our governing bodies but support the processes of governance that support the representative nature of the city council. I'm not talking about getting involved in electoral politics but in things like public hearings, discussion,

and deliberation; training people in the organization to anticipate and foster participation; and *building structures of participation that will be seen as legitimate* [emphasis added]."

These three steps require that government pay increasing attention to how we get things done, as well as to getting things done efficiently. Both concerns are crucial, but they often are incompatible. In the Lawrence, Kansas, area (where Nalbandian was formerly a councilmember and mayor), it has taken us 10 years to build a bypass highway. It still is unfinished. Even when that road has been completed, a negative message cannot be avoided: "Government cannot get things done in a timely fashion." It has taken so long because we have had to pay so much attention to the "process" values of representation, equity, and individual rights. Because of the potential tension between getting things done efficiently and respecting process values, political leadership has become much more important in our communities than ever before. And staff members who know how to assist their elected leaders and are *willing* to assist them in weaving their way among these values earn gold stars.

Positive Examples

Here are a couple of shining instances. In Lawrence, we rebuilt our municipal swimming pool, with effects that were surprising. We discovered that we had built the best pool facilities in town: a diving well, a zero entry-depth pool, competitive 50-meter lanes, water play features, a slide, a lily pad walk, a sand playground, and beautiful landscaping. A neighbor told me his family was considering dropping their membership at the country club because their kids wanted to go to the city pool.

Pool attendance was up, but that was not unexpected. The surprise was that the number of adults, as a percentage of patrons, increased. The zero entry-depth pool attracted parents with young children to stay a while, and the lap area

attracted older adults who wanted to exercise. The result is a more diverse group of patrons.

The pool is located in the downtown, the heart and soul of Lawrence. The pool has pumped additional life into the downtown in the summer, and it has helped integrate our town socially. This is community building, and we have learned the lesson that government can create public spaces where people can gather and, through their interaction, build a common identity.

Community building in Norfolk, Virginia, reached a milestone in March 1999, when a \$300 million downtown shopping mall opened. For nearly 40 years, the city had labored with diverse city councils and changing social and economic cycles to in-fill a 17-acre tract that the city had land-banked. The project, a partnership between Norfolk and the Taubman Development Company, features upscale Nordstrom and Dillard's department stores and 150 other tenants. The mall, which is the largest economic development project in the city's history, has involved various special-interest communities (archeological, historical, church, and architectural) in detailed, participative charrettes, as well as involving the African-American community (40 percent of the population) in issues ranging from retail training to minority contract participation.

The shopping center is the culmination of the city's longstanding community building strategy, which has sought to restore "place" and "connectivity" to the historic seaport town. The city and its sense of pride have been radically transformed over time by a series of renewed and new institutions like the opera, a ballpark, science museum, stage theater, art museum, zoo, community college, and medical school.

Each project has entailed a style of partnership that relies on grass-roots participation by affected stakeholders. Recently named the "best medium-sized" city in the South by *Money* magazine, Norfolk joins a small circle of inner cities that have slowed and perhaps

turned around economic declines.

The Lawrence and Norfolk examples show the importance of public initiatives that go beyond service delivery and influence the sense of community. But these efforts are not without risk. Despite relative political stability in tumultuous times and a longtime tradition of a strong council-manager form of government, Norfolk today struggles with the political-process values of equity and representation. As the city has moved to a ward system (effective 1992), leadership from the council has become less predictable, placing administrative initiatives at risk.

Political Diversity

The last point we want to make is to connect this discussion to the phenomenon of political diversity and the challenge it poses to council-manager government, especially in larger cities and counties. In a community, the less argument there is over what should be accomplished and the fewer issues that revolve around equity and representation, the more the local government professionals can focus their energy on service delivery and can reasonably believe they are making a substantial contribution to a sense of community.

The real challenges arises in diverse communities. In these cities and counties, which include places with larger populations, it sometimes has become difficult to get things done because issues of representation, equity, and rights dominate. These are values dealing with process and fairness. Service delivery is crucial to the well-being of residents and their quality of life, but it is not sufficient if the goal is to encourage thinking about the public interest.

A government has to be able to get things done that people can look to with pride if it wants to maintain the kind of legitimacy that Karma Ruder and Eric Anderson have referred to. Localities with diverse populations may suffer in two ways when measured against this

standard. First, the governing body itself probably is diverse, and it often seems as if most issues involve a conflict in values. This has been Norfolk's experience.

And second, for council-manager government to work effectively, the governing body must act as a team. It is no wonder that in large communities council-manager government seems on the defense. Likewise, one can understand the appeal of the strong mayor. Confronted with a divided governing body that seemingly cannot act as one, it is difficult to counter the call for political leadership that a strong mayor represents.

There is not enough room here to talk about politics, and much of what needs to be said about community building cannot be explored without that discussion. Perhaps it is enough to end by expressing the thought that unless a manager works in a homogeneous community, legitimizing the local government manager's role in terms of how effectively services are delivered is not enough. For a manager, there are risks in seeing yourself as a community builder because related tasks require administrative initiative. But in the long run, the more the citizens connect local government management with community values, the more secure the council-manager form of government will be. **DAI**

¹John Nalbandian, "Facilitating Community, Enabling Democracy: New Roles for Local Government Managers," *Public Administration Review* (May/June 1999).

²Joseph Tussman, *Obligation and the Body Politic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960).

John Nalbandian is professor, department of public administration, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas. Jim Oliver, former city manager of Norfolk, Virginia, is senior fellow for state and local policy, Thomas Jefferson Public Policy Program, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.