

Civic Infrastructure A New Approach to Improving Community Life

BY JOHN PARR

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In their book Civic Innovation in America, Carmen Sirianni and Lew Friedland describe an incident in the late 1980s. John Parr, who was then president of the National Civic League, was trying to convince a skeptical audience of city and county managers of the “new realities” of local governance. Citizens were demanding a place at the table of decision making, he explained, and public managers and elected officials had to find ways of working collaboratively with this newly empowered citizenry. “So you are saying I should take all my education and throw it out the window?” asked one of his listeners. John’s answer: “You’re getting warm.” At which point, “Sixty people stood up and walked out of the room” (p. 79).

“Strategic planning, visioning, facilitation, consensus-based decision-making, collaborative problem solving—all those now-accepted notions were almost foreign words when the Civic League started talking about them,” recalls former NCL President Chris Gates, who worked with John during those formative years. “There were a lot of people who were really skeptical of process. They felt that facilitation and meetings were a waste of time and officials simply needed to be decisive decision makers, but we felt very strongly that process wasn’t a waste of time. Process was actually what you needed to pull increasingly diverse communities together to create solutions to difficult problems.”

It is a tribute to the work of John Parr—and countless others—that many of the cutting-edge ideas he promoted are now taught at public administration schools or discussed at professional conferences.

The essay reproduced here, first published in this journal in 1993, lays out some of these ideas, including a new concept known as “civic infrastructure,” which he defined as “the invisible structures and processes through which the social contract is written and rewritten in communities.”

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. . . Scholars and practitioners of urban and community affairs are beginning to sense that civic associations and traditions play an integral role in the health of communities, whatever their size. At the National Civic League, we call the formal and informal processes and networks through which communities make decisions and solve problems civic infrastructure.

Successful communities honor and nurture their civic infrastructures. They do not look primarily to Washington for money or program guidance. Rather, leaders in America’s most vital communities recognize the interdependence among business, government, nonprofit organizations, and individual citizens. In particular, these communities recognize that solving problems and seizing opportunities are not the exclusive province of government. A common thread in successful communities is the ongoing struggle through formal and informal processes to identify common goals and meet individual and community needs and aspirations. Successful communities are blurring the boundaries between government, business, and the nonprofit sectors. . . .

Our society has reached one of those watershed transition points in history that call for a great deal of attention to be paid to developing a new social contract. Our country is changing dramatically in

every demographic category, from race and ethnicity to family composition and age. We are moving from an industrial to an information/service society. Metropolitan regions are not finding themselves competing internally for economic development, but competing internationally with other “city-states.”

The Current Realities

A major reason communities are taking new approaches is the growing realization that the challenges they face are not unique to their specific circumstances. *All* communities are facing this set of realities:

- There will continue to be fewer public dollars available for dealing with critical societal issues. Challenges and problems, and the solutions to them, will increasingly be the responsibility of local and regional communities.
- More local responsibility will place greater importance on integrity and effectiveness in local government.
- Collaboration and interdependence will be watchwords for local and regional action.
- Power will continue to be widely and thinly distributed.
- Government is a key actor, but only one actor, in developing and implementing solutions to community problems.
- Increasing diversity—racial, ethnic, cultural, gender, socioeconomic, sexual orientation, age, physical, or mental ability—and the potential for polarization are realities for every community.
- Every community must focus on developing new strategies and tools to get people to agree on a plan and then work together to achieve it.

Historic Approaches to Community Problem Solving

Barely two months into his presidency, Lyndon Johnson stood before a joint session of Congress and . . . called on all Americans to join him in a war on poverty, asking us to “replace . . . despair with opportunity.” But his rhetoric was far ahead

of our country’s knowledge about how to deal effectively with such challenges as poverty facing our communities.

In the effort to address these challenges, community leaders from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s turned to the federal government and various physical development programs that emphasized public housing construction and income maintenance. Urban planners discovered, however, that too often new housing projects did not necessarily produce quality neighborhoods, and too often downtown skyscrapers did not lead to a thriving central business district. From the mid 1970s to the late 1980s, many of these leaders—disillusioned with physical development—shifted their attention and resources to economic development, which relied on public-private investment partnerships to meet community challenges.

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Again, however, citizens discovered that this approach did not really address the issues their communities faced. Although economic development helped revitalize certain neighborhoods in some towns and cities, it still left many neighborhoods that did not receive direct attention without resources or optimism. Only in the last few years have people begun to appreciate the need for more comprehensive programs, rather than narrow revitalization efforts. We now know that we need to rebuild the formal and informal networks of communication in our society and invest in the most important resource we have, human capital. . . .

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The Past Focus on Citizen Participation

From the days of the challenge issued by Johnson, there was a major focus on citizen participation as a means of giving those without resources a greater say in the programs it was hoped would improve their communities. Model Cities, a “War on Poverty” program that sought to channel federal money to community-based projects, called for “maximum feasible participation.”

The authors of *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy* see two strong reasons for the historical push toward increased political participation. They write that active participation empowers individuals and gives them a sense of ownership in their community. This effect, in turn, leads to a more responsive and healthier public sector. The emphasis on the participation of citizens in decision-making processes has been important and in some cases has led to an improvement in people’s lives, but no one would question that the vast majority of communities and their people are in worse shape today than they were in 1960. One of the major failings of the focus on citizen participation was that little work was done to figure out everyone had a seat at the table and could contribute meaningfully to decision making. There is a clear need to focus more on the processes by which communities cope with change. . . . People concerned with public policy have not looked closely enough at the system and processes by which communities make decisions.

The shift is occurring as people realize they must pay greater attention to the formal and informal processes through which we talk to each other. Successful communities are throwing off old traditions, realizing that no group will succeed unless the diverse needs of the entire community are met. Bank presidents, community activists, developers, and religious leaders are using informal gatherings and processes to sort out differences and develop principles they can agree on. Astute elected and appointed officials do not view these activities as threats but embrace them warmly. They understand, for

instance, that moderate-income housing is not built when a city council or county commission passes an ordinance, but when a coalition of community development corporations, financial institutions, churches, and government agencies collaboratively design and accept responsibility for the effort.

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Academics looking at communities that are progressively dealing with the challenges facing them have found the focus on new processes to be a critical ingredient for success.

Social Capital and Civic Infrastructure

In *Making Democracy Work*, Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam asks, “Why do some democratic governments succeed, while others fail?” The results of his “voyage of discovery” surprised even Putnam. The determinant of success or failure, he found, could be summed up in one simple axiom: civics matters. Adapting a familiar economic principle to community governance, Putnam suggests that the currency of a healthy, civic community is “social capital,” defined as the networks and norms of trust and reciprocity that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. But this raises an important question. If a community does not have a full reservoir of social capital—a strong civic infrastructure—can it be developed? If so, how?

The key to success is building (or rebuilding, when necessary) the community’s civic infrastructure in a variety of settings—small towns such as Sedona, Arizona; the border town of McAllen, Texas; suburban towns such as Westminster, Colorado; the old manufacturing center of Lorain, Ohio; the metro-

politan areas of Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina, and Portland, Oregon; and the entire state of New Hampshire. Citizens from all sectors and corners of the community have come together to build their problem-solving capacity.

All these communities have looked at the challenges confronting them, considered where they would like to be in the future, agreed on what everyone in the community must do to achieve that vision, and finally, developed an action plan to achieve that vision.

Empowerment and Government

When talking about community today, no word is more popular or commonly misunderstood than *empowerment*. The Clinton administration talks about empowering communities as a major part of its emerging urban strategy. When the administration speaks of carrying out its commitments to the concept of community, to family, to the dynamic of economic life, and to rights and responsibilities, the empowerment of citizens and community-based organizations is always the foundation. It is important for the administration and anyone in government at any level to remember that people are not empowered by others. Leaders can create a climate for empowerment or stimulate empowerment, but the responsibility for empowerment itself is one that individuals and organizations must take on themselves.

A key component of creating a healthy civic infrastructure or investing in social capital has to be an empowerment strategy that starts from the bottom up, not from the top down.

The Civic Index

The National Civic League developed the Civic Index to help communities empower themselves by evaluating and improving their civic infrastructure. The ten components of the index serve as a descrip-

tion of the types of skills and processes that must be present for a community to deal effectively with its unique concerns. Whether the specific issue is a quality school system, an air pollution problem, or lack of adequate housing, the need for effective problem-solving and leadership skills is the same. A community must have strong leaders, from all sectors, who are able to work together with informed, involved citizens to reach consensus on those strategic issues that face the community and the region around it. Communities must have the capacity to solve the problems they face.

Communities must resolve, for themselves, that their capacity to address problems requires revitalization. Outside consultants can make recommendations, but action is unlikely without local ownership of a strategy and implementation plan. The Civic Index provides a framework for communities to increase their problem-solving capacity by offering a method and a process for first identifying and recognizing their strengths and weaknesses, and then structuring collaborative approaches to solving shared problems. It offers an environment within which communities can undertake a self-evaluation of their civic infrastructures. The result of such projects is not an end. Rather, the outcome is a clear picture of the actions a community must take—the types of skills and processes it must develop to build its own capacity to deal with critical issues.

These are the components of the Civic Index:

- Citizen participation—making it a “contact sport.”
- Community leadership—it has to come from everywhere.
- Government performance—professional, entrepreneurial, and open.
- Volunteerism and philanthropy—increasing the leverage of your local “points of light.”
- Intergroup relations—strength through diversity.
- Civic education—the community as classroom.

- Community information sharing—it takes more than watching the evening news.
- Capacity for cooperation and consensus building—turning potential conflict into positive action.
- Community vision and pride—you can't build a future without a common vision.
- Intercommunity cooperation—whom are we really competing with?

Communities need to look at all ten of these components. Focusing on only one or two will not improve a community's problem-solving capacity because of the complexity and interrelatedness of the Civic Index components. Moreover, the activities implied by each component are different from traditional ways of thinking and doing business. For instance, citizen participation does not mean holding public hearings after the substantive plans have already been adopted. For citizen participation to be effective, it must be much more aggressive, inclusive, and ongoing.

For communities to fundamentally change the way they deal with the challenges they face, stakeholders must engage in new conversations. A comprehensive

look at civic infrastructure is a fine point of embarkation—for both that conversation and a reframing of the social contract. . . .

Conclusion

The social contract, social capital, and civic infrastructure are critical concepts as we begin the rebuilding of America's communities. Good examples abound of successful efforts in our country. We need to make them the rule rather than the exception as we look to the future.

Positive change can occur when people with different perspectives are organized into teams in which everyone is regarded as a peer. There must be a high level of involvement, a clear purpose, adequate resources, and the power to decide and implement. Leaders must be willing to promote and facilitate these new processes.

That communities must look inward, for the incentive and capacity to change is a lesson learned painfully over the past thirty years. It is also a lesson that federal, state, local, and community leaders must summon up the courage to apply.