



by Diann Ring and Glenn D. Southard

In light of the new fiscal reality created by continuing state take-aways of local revenue, the Claremont City Council decided balancing future budgets would require some significant changes to the way the city does business. By developing a citizen participation process that generated informed, constructive input from as much of the community as possible, Claremont was able to implement the necessary changes quickly and do so with a solid base of public support. Yet the factors that made Claremont's process such a success in this instance could just as well be applied by other communities in addressing any number of issues.

Following the passage of the state's 1992-93 budget, Claremont found itself facing an on-going 15 percent gap between general fund revenues and expenditures. Several years of "rightsizing" the city organization, implementing internal efficiencies, delaying work projects, and taking advantage of one-time savings and revenue opportunities had allowed previous budgets to be balanced without cutting essential city services. But long-term projections showed operating rev-

enues would not keep pace with the expenses of maintaining the current level of services.

ACCEPTING RESPONSIBILITY

In October 1992, the Council began to discuss its options. It was decided early on that it was their responsibility as elected representatives to make the tough choices. But there was also no doubt that collecting meaningful public input on this matter was vital, not only because of the significant

impact these changes would have on nearly every citizen in the community, but because having a base of public support for these types of decisions was more important than ever given the voters' general disenchantment with elected officials at all levels of government.

In deciding which approach to use to obtain this input, the Council first identified some goals it wanted to accomplish. These were:

- provide a real opportunity for everyone in the community to participate in some manner;
- generate informed, constructive input;
- collect as many different ideas and viewpoints as possible; and
- compare the council's vision for the community with that of the citizens.

To truly achieve these goals, the council re-

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alized the process would need to be different than typical public hearings, which, by their nature, put citizens and the council in adversarial roles. Removing the council as much as possible and encouraging interaction between citizens in a non-confrontational setting would be the key. What developed was entitled "Claremont Choices: Funding the Future," a series of seven neighborhood meetings/workshops followed by a final Town Hall meeting. Following is a quick rundown of the highlights on each step of the process.

ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION

Several different techniques were used to encourage public participation. Meetings were held on various evenings of the week to accommodate differing schedules. Sites for the meetings were selected for their accessibility to particular neighborhoods as well as their political "neutrality." Citizens who were unable to attend a meeting in person could still participate by submitting written comments for consideration.

A crucial part of creating the opportunity for citizens to participate was to let them know about the process and to encourage their input. Efforts to ensure everyone in the community was aware of what was going on included sending mailers to all households, placing ads in local papers, and making presentations to local community groups. Working with the local media to ensure they understood the process and appreciated its newsworthiness resulted in a good deal of positive coverage as well.

When Claremont Choices was completed, over 700 people from all areas of the community had participated, a number equal to nearly four percent of the registered voters. More important, the citizens who participated appeared to be fairly representative of the community as a whole, demographically as well as philosophically.

GENERATING INPUT

The format of the neighborhood meetings more than anything else was responsible for generating the type of input the council was seeking. To make this portion of the process as citizen-focused as possible, it was decided that community volunteers would do most of the work in actually running the workshops. A local displaced aerospace professional volunteered to put his extensive experience in facilitating small group discussions to good use as coordinator of this effort. He worked with a group of about 30 other volunteers, preparing them to serve as impartial facilitators during the workshops.

Each of the workshops was emceed by the citizen coordinator. The role of the council

and staff during the workshops was simply to observe the proceedings, listen to what was being said, and answer occasional questions of fact. Informality was the rule so that participants would feel comfortable enough to comment freely.

Following a short welcome by the mayor, participants met in small groups of seven to ten people, guided by the volunteer facilitators, to review and discuss the council's "community vision." This general statement is developed by the council and outlines what it thinks the city should work to achieve over the long term. This exercise served two very important purposes. First, it allowed the council to see if what it envisioned for the community was in line with what the public expected. Second, it helped



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focus the participants' attention on what they wanted for the city so they could better discuss what it would take to achieve those goals financially.

Participants then listened to a short budget presentation by the city manager. Using handouts, a number of straightforward charts and an overhead projector, the manager provided the basics of local government funding, summarizing the city's current fiscal problem, outlining the steps already taken to deal with the situation, and listing the available alternatives. The key here was to give the participants a professional, not political, evaluation of the situation.

Armed with this basic information, the participants again met in their small groups for brainstorming/discussion sessions. Input was solicited from everyone in the group with the facilitators encouraging participants to be as detailed with their suggestions as possible. The citizens were asked to answer the same hard questions the council was facing; What should we be spending our money on?

What, if anything, should we be doing to cut expenses? How, if at all, should we generate more revenue? No idea was dismissed; in fact, every one of them was recorded on a flip chart so that they could be reviewed later.

This part of the process accomplished exactly what the council had hoped it would. Participants shared their thoughts, not just with the city council but with each other, too, about what they wanted their community to be like and spelled out the actions they thought the city should take to ensure that kind of community existed. In so doing, the citizens made it clear what actions they expected the city to take and what actions they would support.

PRESENTING THE RESULTS

Council members then began the task of going through all of the public input, assimilating what they had heard and developing some preliminary recommendations for future budgets. The Town Hall meeting was an opportunity for the council to present the results of their efforts and hear further public comment. All of the flip chart pages from each of the seven workshops were set out in the auditorium where the Town Hall was held. The council wanted the public to know the council had listened to what had been said. Judging from the nature of the public's response at the Town Hall meeting, the council got it right.

The council found all of the participants' suggestions could be categorized into one of several general themes. Council members responded to each of them at the Town Hall meeting, discussing efforts already taken by the city to address the issues, as well as providing their list of recommendations for further action. Among the themes raised by the citizens were:

- cutting wasteful spending and temporarily freezing employee salaries;
- improving operating efficiencies;
- encouraging more economic development; and,
- changing methods of service delivery.

The overriding consensus, however, was that Claremonters did not support cutting any city services, mostly because of the negative impact it would have on property values and the community's overall quality of life. In fact, many citizens felt there was a need for enhancing some human service programs, especially for young people, along with more emphasis on maintaining the physical infrastructure.

When it came to the question of how to pay for this level of service, participants identified several cost savings opportunities that should be explored along with a continuation



active participants in our democracy at a time when participation seems to be shrinking. I want them to have the tools to access government and to feel the power of impacting decisions.

To change, there is a contract we must make. I can be successful only if those who are involved in local government do their share. Supporting programs like the workshop I attended is part of your obligation. Through the cooperative efforts of my school and the city I was able to attend the workshop provided by the Institute for Local Self Government. Other cities should make similar efforts to encourage attendance.

If government is not a favorite high school course, does it reflect the fact that teachers of these courses don't care about the material? Possibly in some cases, but in most instances, it may actually be the reverse; they care too much. Consider the fact that probably a majority of high school government teachers were, like myself, political science majors in college. These teachers love government. They spent years studying every nuance of the subject and can cite trivia about elections and the concept of checks and balances that would drive ordinary people to drink. It is also quite likely that all of their college work was focused on the national government.

High school texts, written with a focus on the national government, compound the problem. After all, state governments are all different and there are even more local variations. How can one write a book for a national audience if the focus is other than national in scope? It would be foolish and guarantee poor text sales; these are the books that often drive curricula.

My teaching has reflected this. I found that I had been spending class time encouraging my students to write letters to the president or to their congressman, knowing and

even having to explain to them that while their response might be a form letter, it was important to let people in Washington know their views. It wasn't a comfortable answer for me or them. Not only is the national government hard for students to impact because of its size, it also involves issues that are so complex that students feel overwhelmed or that do not directly affect them, or for that matter, any citizens. Contrast this with local issues of traffic congestion or zoning for low-cost housing units.

tional level. The same is true for my students. Today there are laws against skateboarding in some areas of the city. The sale of spray paint is being debated here and in a neighboring city as graffiti becomes a serious problem. Students care about these issues.

The final test in any government class should be the extent to which students become active citizens who participate not only as voters, but in every aspect of their government. Using local government as the focal point can enhance participation and citizenship.

Students need to appreciate the fact that democracy, with all of its failings, is still the best system available to protect liberty and provide for meaningful citizen involvement.

I'm committed. Now I will make every effort to engage students and develop a positive model of citizen involvement with local government as my vehicle. I challenge local officials to reach out to students and schools, be available, and encourage student participation. First impressions are critical and young people are slow to trust adults. Teachers need your help if we are going to convince young people that government is truly responsive to all of its citizens. Good leaders are important, but without an engaged, knowledgeable and positive community of citizens, democracy cannot succeed.

Note: Further information or copies of the tape, "Santa Barbara City Government" may be obtained by writing Curtis C. Ridling at San Marcos High, 4750 Hollister Avenue, Santa Barbara, 93110.

For more information regarding "Participating in Local Government" contact Clark Goecker, Executive Director, Institute for Local Self Government, 1400 K Street, Suite 400, Sacramento, CA 95814; (916) 443-4136; FAX (916) 444-8671.

About the Program

"Participating in Local Government" was initiated in 1990 by the Institute for Local Self Government to provide teachers and students with the resources necessary for an understanding of local self government and citizenship education.

Resources include:

- A teacher curriculum binder "A Guide for Teaching Local Government" which includes a primer on California local government and three-week lesson plans for elementary, middle and high school grade levels,
- An annual one-week Summer Teachers Institute,
- "A Student Guide to Participating in Local Government" for secondary grade levels (classroom sets will be available in November 1993), and
- A video supporting classroom materials for the secondary grade levels (available in February 1994).

Future activities will include a student guide for elementary grade levels, additional video resource materials, a guide on career opportunities in local government, guidelines for successful community service programs and continuing education for teachers.

Funding for "Participating in Local Government" is provided by the California Department of Education (ESEA Chapter 2 funds), the Joseph Drown Foundation, the ARCO Foundation, Southern California Edison, PG&E, Willdan Associates, GTE California, Pacific Telesis and over 35 cities that have sponsored teachers to attend the Summer Teachers Institute.

The Institute for Local Self Government is a non-profit, non-partisan tax exempt organization established in 1955 and affiliated with the League of California Cities.

How many of you remember your high school government class fondly? Unless it was terribly unusual, it focused on these national concepts that seem fairly useless to most high school students. While I still love discussing the national issues, it has become quite clear that local land use decisions are probably of far more relevance to the quality of my life than many decisions made at the state or na-





of the city's efforts to increase operating efficiencies. But they also recognized that cost savings alone would not be enough to bal-

ance future operating budgets. Raising revenues was the only realistic alternative left. In calling for new revenues, citizens made

it very clear the methods used to generate the funds should be as equitable as possible, ensuring that everyone in the community would pay their "fair share." A utility tax was viewed as the best alternative for achieving that goal, with exemptions for only the lowest income households.

Following the completion of the Claremont Choices process, all of this information, including the announcement of public hearings to consider a utility users tax, was put into a special issue of the community newsletter and mailed to every residence in the city.

DEVELOPING AN ACTION PLAN

In the end, the council developed a list of actions for staff to follow in developing the two-year budget for 1993-95 and beyond. They were:

- implement a utility users tax;
- increase user fees to reflect the true cost of providing service;
- explore joint ventures with the school district and other agencies;
- increase emphasis on programs for young people;
- consider new ways of service delivery if savings can be achieved;
- base employee salary increases on performance and not on automatic cost-of-living adjustments;
- increase the use of volunteers in city programs;
- provide a greater emphasis on economic development, and
- continue to implement operating efficiencies.

Each of these items has already been implemented or is included as a work project in the 93-95 budget. The utility tax, the issue with the most potential for public resistance, was adopted without organized opposition to or questioning of the city's need for the revenues. This is in contrast to several nearby communities where utility tax measures led to recall efforts and significant public pressure not to adopt the tax.

On one level, Claremont Choices is seen as a success because it resulted in a financial action plan that will get the city through the current fiscal crisis in California. But more than that, it created a real understanding among many of our citizens of what it's like to make the tough choices council members sometimes face. And finally, it provides a blueprint for future efforts to build widespread public support for potentially unpopular decisions.

More information about "Claremont Choices: Funding the Future" is available by writing to the City of Claremont, Community Information Coordinator, P.O. Box 880, Claremont, CA 91711-0880.



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