

From: Greg Nelson, Office of Councilman Joel Wachs Office  
Re: The Rebirth of Urban Democracy

In 1993, the Brookings Institution published a landmark study by three professors from Tufts University. They examined five cities that characterized the most impressive commitment to the idea of participatory democracy through the development of a citywide network of neighborhood associations that brought government closer to the people -- St. Paul, Portland, Birmingham, Dayton, and San Antonio.

Several relevant portions of the book have been extracted to help you understand the underlying principles that have guided the successful efforts of these progressive cities to put themselves in the forefront of neighborhood empowerment movement.

**THE REBIRTH OF URBAN DEMOCRACY**  
By Jeffrey M. Berry, Kent E. Portney, and Ken Thomson.

There is widespread agreement that democracy in America needs renewal. Too few people participate in the governmental process. Too few people seem to feel that they share responsibility for making government work better. Too many people are content to rely on their elected officials to solve society's problems, even though they are dissatisfied with the results of those officials' actions. (p. 1)

If substantially more people voted but little else to try and influence government, it would be a rather hollow revival of democracy. Rebuilding citizenship in America means that reform must move beyond getting more people into private voting booths to getting more people to public forums where they can work with their neighbors to solve the problems of their community. (p. 2)

(Scholars Benjamin Barber and Michael Sandel and other communitarian critics of liberalism) attack it for fostering communities without shared values. (p. 2)

Face-to-face democracy moves politics away from its adversarial norm, where interest groups square off in conflict and lobbyists speak for their constituents. Instead, the bonds of friendship and community are forged as neighbors look for common solutions to their problems. (p. 3)

(Participatory democracy) is seen as redemptive in three crucial ways. First, participation nourishes the democratic spirit of individuals. Second, it builds community, which in turn nurtures shared values such as compassion, tolerance, and equality. Third, and most broadly, participation transforms institutions so that they become more effective instruments of democracy. (p. 5)

....people learn to be good citizens through practice. (p. 5)

The arguments against participatory democracy attack the romanticism of participation and replace it with a steely logic that justifies a system where elites hold disproportionate power and the masses participate at a moderate level. (p. 7)

The legacy of the 1960s and 1970s is that public involvement programs failed because the public did

not care to participate. Those who did participate were seen as wither rabble-rousers or elites unrepresentative of the large community. (p. 21)

(Political scientist Aaron Wildavsky said) "A recipe for violence: Promise a lot; deliver a little. Lead people to believe they will be much better off, but let there be no dramatic improvement." (p. 24)

It is autonomy that the neighborhood residents seem to value most. In Portland, the neighborhood associations were so protective of their independence that they fought city hall for 14 years to keep it from writing a set of guidelines that defined the rights and responsibilities of such organizations. (p. 108)

As a Portland administrator noted, "Those that are better organized win. This has nothing to do with social, racial, ethnic, or geographic status, but with who know how to play the game." (p. 182)

(A Dayton official said) "We've determined that our most successful projects in the neighborhoods are those the neighborhood people take on themselves. Projects that are city hall driven tend not to be very successful." (p. 182)

(Referring to a survey) An overwhelming majority of citizens who have heard of the citizen participation system feel that the neighborhood associations defuse hostility. (p. 201)

(In a study of housing developments in the San Francisco Bay area, Bernard Fieden found that) objections (raised as part of the current process) cause more delay than they would if dealt with earlier and also may lead to high costs for redesigning a project. (p. 207)

(In a survey of) 105 administrators and 28 city councillors, a total of 69 offered at least one evaluative comment on city participation in their city. The positive comments outnumbered the negative by about 2-1. The predominant response was that citizen participation brought produced delay and brought about resolution of issue differences at the same time. This is not a contradictory as it may sound. (p. 209)

(A St. Paul administrator said) Because the people have ownership of the decisions, they are more durable; there is more consensus." (p. 210)

(A developer said) I'd much rather work with the city of St. Paul because .... it has a citizen participation process that addresses any issues at an early stage in the project. You don't put a lot of money into it and then go down to city hall and then all of a sudden all the people who show up are negative and kill it." (p. 211)

In Dayton, the passage of several bond measures in recent years was directly attributable to the existence of the participation system. (p. 252)

An overwhelming proportion (88.5%) of citizens in the core study cities believe that no other group represents their community's interests better than the neighborhood association. Most citizens also believe that neighborhoods are treated equally at city hall.  
(p. 288)

The most striking finding of this examination of the impact of citizen participation on individuals is its effect on the sense of community. .... at each level of citizen participation low-income residents tended to have as high a sense of community as those in the middle- and high-socio-economic groups. (p. 290)

Cities should not attempt to create citizen participation programs unless they are willing to meet three important conditions. First, exclusive powers must be turned over to the citizen participation structures. They must have the authority to allocate some significant goods and services in their communities. Interaction between neighborhood associations and city administrators must be routinized. Second, accompanying such structural changes must be an administrative plan that creates sanctions and rewards for city hall administrators who must interact with the neighborhood groups. Their personal future in city government must be tied to the success of the citizen participation system. Third, citizen participation systems must be citywide in nature. (Programs) should not be explicitly designed as programs to help low-income or minority neighborhoods. As William Julius Wilson has pointed out, the best way to help poor minority groups in cities is to create "programs to which the more advantaged groups of all races and class backgrounds can positively relate." (p. 295)

Among the other structural features that will also contribute to the success ....

-- Ideal neighborhood-based public involvement programs should have control over some significant discretionary financial resources. Nothing will make neighborhood organizations more credible to residents than the right to appropriate funds as the organizations see fit.

-- ... city should provide financial support to enable the neighborhood associations to communicate with every household .... at least a couple times a year.

-- Terms of office for volunteers leading the neighborhood associations should be relatively short to work against the development of oligarchies.

-- They should be non-partisan. Not involved in electoral activity. (p. 296)

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