

Public/Community Action

Public action is action by citizens during their day-to-day activities. Public action can be thought of as the horizontal action that weaves in and out of the vertical action of government.

Citizens' actions are more likely to be mutually reinforcing and complementary if they build on public deliberation. Creating public action relies on four insights:

1. Identifying **shareable purposes** out of the many reasons people have for responding to a problem that affects each of them personally, yet in different ways.
2. Diagnosing the obstacles in all relationships or in working together. These are obstacles that stand in the way of dealing with a serious problem and of developing a sense of **interdependence** – a sense that *even though my purposes and interests are different from yours, I can't get what I want without your help*. This sense leads to **restructuring our working relationships**.
3. Recognizing **inherent capacities**, the resources and power that come from each person's unique talents and that can be expressed through everyday activities.
4. **Joining capacities** so that the whole of individual actions can be greater than the sum of the parts. Joined capacities create a sense of possibility and develop public will. Joined capacities that serve suitable purposes result in a rich array of actions that reinforce one another.

Moving from Deliberation to Action

We had a forum – So what?

There are many “products” or actions that can result from forums. Keep in mind:

- There are some actions we can readily observe and many that we cannot. Deliberation is a long-term investment, not a quick fix.
- The process is not linear or orderly. Many things can happen simultaneously. We may feel the rocking motion of taking two steps forward and one step back. Sometimes we may feel stuck altogether.
- There is no “right” path or direction. We cut our own path as we walk it. Trial and error is essential to the process. We learn as much from our mistakes as from our successes.

1. Citizens Acting More Constructively

Deliberative forums offer us a way of sharpening our own thinking and judgments about public issues as well as an opportunity to hear and absorb what others value. When citizens experience deliberative forums, they may discover, find they like, this different way of relating to each other around important issue. The deliberative process may spread to other contexts, as people who have participated in forums bring the process into their workplace or other civic activities.

2. Articulating a Public Voice

The term public voice refers to the different way of describing what people are thinking and saying about an issue that can arise out of a forum. It will reflect areas of agreement, disagreement, and the trade-offs that people are willing or not willing to make.

The action of articulating a public voice spreads the benefits of deliberation beyond the people who participated in the forums, and does the following:

- Captures the complexity of an issue as well as the variety of ways that people are thinking about it.
- Asks “how” rather than “how many?” It’s not a public opinion poll, a random sample, or a deciding vote.
- Identifies common ground upon which people might act, points on which they differ and why, and trade-offs that they are or are not willing to make.
- Is a means for citizens to communicate with other citizens and with policy-makers about what is important to them. It gives the public a voice in policy-making and is the core of functioning democracies.

3. Groups Acting in Complementary Ways

One product of a deliberative forum may be that various groups in a community decide to act on the issue in ways that complement each other. These sorts of actions are not necessarily, and need not be, part of one coordinated or planned effort. They are instead the outgrowth of different people and groups who through public deliberations, have come to understand that, while they have differences of opinion, they also share certain aims. Despite whatever differences they may have, they can engage in parallel or converging actions toward their shared goals. This sort of action is pragmatic and does not let ideological differences get in the way of constructive action.

It may help to think of this as the beginning of the weaving of a “public web” (as in “spider,” not the internet.) It’s where people start behaving in mutually reinforcing ways around an issue, even though they may still disagree on certain points. Some strands of the web are citizens connecting with each other, others represent new interactions between institutions, and still others emerge from new relationships between citizens and institutions.

4. Designing Action Together

After public deliberations, some individuals and/or groups may want to take a step toward considering coordinated or organized action on the problem. For many reasons, including a lack of trust, people who participate in forums may not be ready to commit to plans for action. They may, however, be willing to begin, without making any commitment, exploring possibilities for action together.

This is a testing phase, or “trying it on for size.” Participants are simply exploring what an action plan might look like, without a commitment to act. They examine the possibilities for action, agree on a general direction, and identify and analyze different steps they might take.

5. Taking Action Together

If and when they are ready, people may make a commitment to act together. They may act as a group or separately, according to their plan. The plan can be written or verbal; formal or informal; tightly structured or loose and flexible. This form of action focuses on what is possible and is most effective when it draws on everyone’s capacities.

Does One Deliberative Forum Make a Difference?

Even though participating in a single forum may yield only modest, hard-won progress, that progress is important and significant because it represents a decisive departure from politics as usual. Participants should have faith in their ability to transform the political debate in their community. As Margaret Mead understood, we should “never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world, [because] it is the only thing that ever has.”

A community in which a small group has begun the process of deliberation has turned a corner in its political life. A politically healthy community is not one that has solved all its problems, but one that has the ability and the will to make the hard choices upon which sustainable and widely-supported policies and actions depend.

The challenge is to bring ever-greater numbers of one’s fellow citizen into that process. Any progress in this direction is significant for the community as a whole, because it is the process by which political choices are considered and made that is the key to the eventual solution of public problems.

The quick fix is doomed to failure. Only a sustained process of democratic deliberation stands a chance of producing sound and effective public policies and action.

Michael Briand, (Draft)
Criteria for Identifying Examples of Public Acting
Report to the Kettering Foundation, January, 1999

Public acting is a set of actions over time that:

- Contribute to the creation of a “*composite public good*”;
- Are diverse but *complementary*;
- Require a disposition toward *cooperation*;
- Involve modification of ongoing activities, not addition of new activities;
- Do not require exceptional effort or initiative; and
- Are undertaken by members of the public – citizens – not by government

1. The acting contributes to the creation of a “*composite public good*.”

A composite public good is something of value that, taken as a whole, is “the same” for all members of the public, but is composed of various particular goods that may differ from individual to individual.

Example: an educated citizenry, a robust economy, a creative culture, a clean environment, a safe neighborhood, good public schools.

Each of these examples represents a good that (a) has value for all members of a public, and (b) is made up of different individual “goods.” For instance, everyone benefits from an educated citizenry, which is a public good, but an educated citizenry is composed of a variety of individual “educations.”

2. The acting is diversely constituted but *complementary*.

Like the good it seeks to achieve, public acting is itself “composite,” made up of a variety of different individual “actings” that contribute in various ways to realization of that good. Although those “actings” are not closely coordinated or directed, they parallel each other and provide mutual reinforcement. In short, they are *complementary*.

In each of the examples above, the way one person contributes to a general public good may differ from the way other persons contribute to that good. Thus, one person might contribute to a strong economy by investing in ventures that create new jobs. Another might devote his time and experience to retraining workers whose jobs have been eliminated.

3. The complementarity of public acting requires a disposition toward *cooperation*.

Cooperation is “acting in pursuit of one’s own good but with active regard for the impact of one’s actions on ability of others to pursue their goods.” “Active regard” means attempting, within reasonable limits, to facilitate the efforts of others to pursue their own goods. This regard stems from the recognition that one’s own well-being is affected by the actions of others. It reminds us that we can, and often must, work together because it is in our own interest to do so not because we want the same thing as other folks, but because we stand to gain from a pragmatic decision to accommodate each other. *

The cooperation that public acting requires need not be the result of a conscious calculation and an overt decision by people to show an active regard for the impact of their actions on others. People must *in effect* say, “Here is what I’m willing to do.” They need not say these words to others, or even to themselves.

3.2 As in all instances of cooperation, in public acting the parties subscribe to the norm of *reciprocity*. People say, in effect, “Here is what I’m willing to do, *provided* you are willing to do that.” Again, they need not think this consciously or say it explicitly to others-the proviso may be implicit.

3.3 Cooperation, and hence public acting, is possible in the absence of *consensus*. People need not be in complete agreement with respect to either the ends of their respective actions or the means by which they pursue those ends. They must, however, find them *compatible*- i.e., not in conflict.

4. Public acting involves modification of ongoing activities, not addition of new activities. Public acting consists of actions that a person is already taking, but that he or she alters in such a way that those actions contribute to the realization of a composite good. The modification may be minimal, as when a person acts with “active regard” for the ability of others to pursue their own goods. Or it may be more substantial, involving radical changes in one’s actions.

5. Public acting does not require exceptional effort or initiative. Because public acting involves actions that a person is already taking, it is something virtually any citizen can do. It does not require people to work harder than others or do what others are unwilling to do. It requires only that a person carry out his or her actions with an eye to the contribution he or she can make for the public good.

6. Public acting is not what governmental bodies or agencies do – it is something that citizens do.

Government may be involved. It might even be the single most important “player.” But the success of the effort will depend crucially on the (complementary) actions of citizens.

Without acceptance by citizens of personal responsibility for “advancing the cause,” the public good will not be fully realized.

*The dictionary defines *cooperation* as “working together toward a common end or purpose.” It might prove helpful to reserve this definition for *collaboration*. “Collaboration” implies something stronger than “cooperation”: a readiness-perhaps even an eagerness-to work together, as when, for example, two scholars collaborate on an article. In contrast, “cooperation” implies a weaker form of working together. It suggests that the parties who are cooperating have not given up their respective purposes, but have adjusted or modified the manner in which they pursue those purposes such that their actions support, reinforce, enhance, or aid- i.e., *complement*-each other’s purposes and actions. They make this adjustment or modification precisely because each realizes that cooperating enhances his ability to achieve his own purposes. As the oft-invoked example of barn-raising illustrates, cooperation is a self-interested, mutual willingness to accommodate others that grows out of recognition of potential mutual benefit.

How Forum Results Stimulate Public Action: An Example



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Looking for common ground

Ottawa County committee outlines top goals for proposed change

By Krista Dahon
Miami News-Record

The Ottawa County Zoning Feasibility Committee discovered valuable tools and found some common ground Tuesday as members discussed their opinions in a moderated forum.

Claude Bess of the OSU Extension Service led by example as

he showed committee members how to bring a diverse group of people into agreement.

"When you can present the best case for the least favorite option ... you have made progress," Bess said. "When you can identify the negative points of the most popular option ... you have made progress there too."

In the first of many discussions to

come on the pros and cons of free market, protection of open space and managed growth issues, the committee found unity on three points.

First, they agreed something must be done to protect property owners. Next, they said there needs to be a balance between property rights and rights of the county. Finally, they agreed there is a need for a county-

wide sounding board.

The ability to moderate a successful forum will be necessary as the committee begins the process of putting together a planning and zoning plan for Ottawa County. Bess told committee members that gathering public input on emotional issues such as property zoning can get messy, but with forum ground rules

and a concerted effort to find common ground, diversity can find unity.

The committee also heard from Assistant District Attorney David Anderson who gave the members insight on what the law has to say about regional planning and zoning.

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Zoning

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Anderson said that once the committee has put together a plan, there are two ways to implement rural zoning.

The first option is to ask the people to decide yes or no to zoning by placing the option on a ballot, according to Anderson. If the vote passes then the commissioners will instate a planning and zoning board who, under the arm of the county commissioners, can

put a zoning plan in place. The specifics of the plan do not require voter approval.

The second option is to form a city/county cooperative — a joint force of various city and county governments.

"If you go that route, there is nothing that has to go to the vote of the people," Anderson said. "The county decides simply to do it or not and they appoint a committee who comes up with a master plan. The governing entity itself enforces the plan."

"That is really all there is," Anderson said. "To a great extent you are going into

uncharted areas for rural Oklahoma areas like we are in."

Committee members don't deny that the task before them is daunting.

Launching their first effort to see examples of rural zoning, the committee approved a sub-committee to gather zoning plans from Tulsa, Oklahoma and Rogers counties — the only three counties in Oklahoma which have zoning.

The committee will meet again March 19 at 7 p.m. to resume discussion of zoning options for Ottawa.

Communities with Old Thinking vs. Those with New Thinking

	 “Old Thinking”	“New Thinking” 
Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Looks for leaders who will solve problems Emphasizes what a few leaders can do Believes only a few can make choices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has citizens who accept their own responsibility Expects leadership from everyone (“when you are talking about leadership, you are talking about yourself”) Insists everyone has choices and is responsible for them
Problem Solving Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tries to find “the solution” Emphasizes deficiencies Assesses needs Is stuck in rigid, “only one way” to think of problems Believes there are no possibilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tries to become the solution Looks for opportunities, creating possibilities Identifies capacities in individuals Redefines its problems — develops new perspectives, both on issues and how people can relate to them Sees possibilities
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wants trusting relations so that people will like one another Personalizes politics Has diversity Relies on bureaucratic coordination, regulations, and accountability Decides between competing interests Emphasizes the parts, divisions, and various segments of the community Sympathizes Segmented Holds public events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Builds functioning relationships — “public” relationships — pragmatic problem solving Holds an objective view of politics, distinguishes public from personal relations Has diverse groups that work together Stimulates complementary (mutually reinforcing) action Connects existing interests Emphasizes the community as a whole Treats with respect Interconnected — creates public space

Communities with Old Thinking vs. Those with New Thinking (con't)

	 “Old Thinking”	“New Thinking” 
Power	Tries to “empower” others	Creates power — people empower themselves with their own experiences and unique abilities
Citizen Education	Provides citizen information Solves problems for people	Provides political education Teaches people how to solve their problems
Talk	Talks little, secretively (in cliques), and often in adversarial terms — solution wars common Talks about issues Avoids hard choices Influenced by popular opinion	Talks openly, often, and deliberately Talks through issues Makes hard choices Influenced more by public judgment
Action	Looks for good models to imitate from outside Works in specialized groups Works vertically Only a few are involved in action Uncomfortable with change Protects Takes little initiative Refrains from projects out of a sense of incompetence Expects quick results	Starts inside before moving out Works in interrelated networks and association with “boundary spanners” Works more laterally Involvement is widespread Takes risks Makes sacrifices Has multiple sources on initiative Engages in projects to acquire new skills Works for long-term results