
From the Forest to the River: Citizens' Views of Stakeholder Engagement

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Abstract

Since the early 1990s collaboration and consensus processes have become associated with success in the environmental policy and natural resource policy arenas. Interest in collaboration and consensus processes have emerged, in part, out of a frustration with more conventional efforts used to involve stakeholders, to work through conflicts, and to make decisions in the environmental and natural resource policy arenas. Collaboration and consensus processes, when designed well and applied appropriately, provide opportunities for meaningful stakeholder engagement.

This essay features aspects of two government-led or agency-based (Koontz et al. 2004; Moore and Koontz 2003) planning efforts that consider collaboration and citizens/stakeholder engagement. Both projects, a forest management plan revision on the Allegheny National Forest in Pennsylvania, and a regional sediment management planning effort at the mouth of the Columbia River in the Pacific Northwest, have considered a Collaborative Learning (CL) approach (Daniels and Walker 2001) for stakeholder involvement. As part of these CL applications, citizens/stakeholders have been asked for their views of the kind of participation processes they value and how they prefer to be involved. This essay presents a summary of citizens' ideas. In doing so, it

addresses the question: How do stakeholders want to be engaged in agency-led planning efforts? Data reveal that stakeholders prefer active engagement, access to information and events, and clearly defined decision space. Prior to presenting the project data germane to this question, the paper highlights the trinity of voice and Collaborative Learning.

Keywords: collaborative processes, Collaborative Learning, stakeholder involvement

Introduction

Since the early 1990s collaboration and consensus processes have become associated with success in the environmental policy and natural resource policy arenas. Collaboration and consensus advocates can point to the rise of community-oriented, place-based groups such as the Applegate Partnership in Oregon, the Catron County Citizens Group in New Mexico, the Downeast Lakes Forestry Partnership in Maine, the Swan Valley Citizens Coalition in Montana, the Gulf Coastal Plain Ecosystem Partnership, and the Chicago Wilderness Coalition in Illinois. They might note how consensus has become the decision standard for watershed councils in the United States (Sabatier et al. 2005; Webler et al. 2003; Leach and Pelkey 2001). Furthermore, publications,

such as *Making Collaboration Work* (Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000) *Across the Great Divide* (Brick et al. 2001), *Collaborative Environmental Management* (Koontz et al. 2004), *Adaptive Governance and Water Conflict* (Scholz and Stiffler 2005), and *Faces and Places of Cooperative Conservation* (Hess and Michaels 2005), have featured successful stories of collaboration and consensus efforts.

Government agencies have joined the collaboration chorus. For example, policies such as the National Fire Plan (U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Interior) and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Environmental Justice Initiative require collaboration among agencies and with stakeholders and communities. During the Clinton presidential administration, Secretary of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt, led the call for consensus and collaboration. Current Secretary of Health and Human Services, Mike Leavitt, brings to the Bush Administration his idea of "Enlibra," a term he coined while Governor of Utah to mean "coming together." Similarly, former Secretary of Interior, Gail Norton, has talked often of the "4 C's:" communication, consultation, cooperation, all in the service of conservation (Norton 2005).

Interest in collaboration and consensus processes has emerged, in part, out of a frustration with more conventional efforts used to involve stakeholders, to work through conflicts, and to make decisions in the environmental and natural resource policy arenas. Conventional processes for public involvement, for example, have emphasized agency-centric, command and control activities such as structured consultation, public hearings, lobbying, and letter writing (Walker 2004). Conventional approaches have done little to open up decision space, share power, and involve citizens meaningfully.

For many stakeholders, a strategy of appeals and litigation or a strategy of "call the Senator" may seem to be the most viable options to tolerating what they have regarded as poor decisions. These actions attempt to assert power outside of a conventional public involvement effort that limits stakeholder engagement to passive consultation activities, such as writing a letter during a public comment period (Walker 2004; Walker 2000).

Collaboration and consensus-building processes, when designed well and applied appropriately, offer opportunities for meaningful stakeholder engagement. As Senecah (2000, 2004) has observed, collaboration and consensus-oriented practices can provide stakeholders with a trinity of voice.

The trinity of voice embodies three interdependent markers of access, civic standing, and influence. If any are missing or severely out of balance with the other two, tensions may develop, effectiveness will be limited, parties may act to demand the missing elements, and conflict will likely escalate.

Access

Access refers to having access to a process that offers opportunity and safety as well as the potential for being heard. Conventional public involvement methods often generate contentious, adversarial action. Public policy decision making escalates towards a sense of pervasive animosity, even hostility driven by distrust, frustrations, skepticism, and entrenched stakeholders' positions and motivations. This access of voice must put people into a place where real opportunity exists for their ideas and opinions being accorded civic standing.

Standing

Standing is closely connected to access. It is an articulated demonstration of and assurance that stakeholder contributions are valued, respected, and honored; that they are "heard." How does a process support standing? A guiding principle from a classic in dispute resolution (Fisher et al. 1991) advocates focusing on interests rather than positions, but Senecah (2004) proposes going a step further to understand what fears and aspirations are driving the interests. Engagement becomes cynicism when stakeholders fear is that they do not count, that they lack legitimacy and civic standing. When frustrated or fearful to a breaking point, good people denied access or standing will create ways to claim it that leads to escalation and distrust.

Influence

Without access and standing there can be little influence other than through contentiousness and unilateral action. Influence does not necessarily mean that every stakeholder gets what s/he wants, nor does it mean that agencies can abdicate their authority over a decision. Influence is about stakeholders' meaningful participation in processes where their ideas matter. Processes that value influence provide opportunities for affecting outcomes; for learning, developing improvements, and achieving mutual goals before a project is completed or a decision made.

As Senecah (2004) explains, the trinity of voice — access, standing, and influence — offers a template for (1) evaluating the efficacy of individual cases of stakeholder engagement, (2) designing of collaborative processes, and (3) diagnosing and treating troubled processes or escalated disputes. As a template, it can be characterized to fit a case's unique context and resources. Senecah's trinity suggests the importance of citizen/stakeholder empowerment: that meaningful participation requires public processes through which citizens gain voice and legitimacy, and opportunities to influence other parties in the situation and the decision authority.

Implementing Senecah's voice trinity seems particularly challenging when federal agencies hold considerable deci-