

CONNECTIONS

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2007

A Year's Review
from the Perspective
of Citizens

WHAT IF?

IMAGINE THIS

COULD IT BE THAT?

MAYBE THE QUESTION WE SHOULD BE ASKING IS...

Introducing the
READERS' FORUM
See page 33

What You Need to Know about *Connections*

With this issue of *Connections*, the Kettering Foundation introduces three significant initiatives for the newsletter.

The first is a decision to change *Connections* from a biannual publication to an annual. This new schedule corresponds with Kettering's review cycle, which goes like this: each year, Kettering focuses its research through a particular point of view, or, as we say at the foundation, lens. The foundation's research has three fundamental foci: citizens, communities, and democratic institutions. This reflects Kettering's hypothesis that democracy requires the following:

- citizens who can make sound decisions about their future;
- communities of citizens acting together to address common problems;
- institutions that are legitimate in the eyes of citizens and that support a democratic society.

By publishing *Connections* once a year, it will serve as a record of the foundation's research focus over the previous 12 months. Therefore, as you'll find throughout the following pages, this issue of *Connections* reflects the foundation's research over the last year—through the lens of citizens.

The second initiative is the addition of a new section, the "Readers' Forum." As its name implies, the new section



features reactions and comments by *Connections* readers, who were invited to review drafts of many of the articles that appear in this newsletter. With the help of our colleagues Connie Crockett and Alice Diebel, we interviewed 13 people from around the country about how their experiences relate to these articles. This feedback is organized into three articles related to the

foundation's hypothesis about democracy, as noted above. The "Forum" is described in more detail on page 33.

To make the new section a true "Readers' Forum," the foundation has devised a new way for readers to react to—and even to read—*Connections*. This is the third initiative: the creation of a new discussion area on the foundation's Web site, www.kettering.org. On the Web site you'll find a new section devoted to this issue of *Connections* and comment areas where readers can participate in a forum around the ideas expressed in the articles published in this issue.

The addition of both the print and online "Readers' Forum" is an attempt to help readers better connect to *Connections*—and the Kettering Foundation. But remember: the online forum will only be as good as you our readers make it.

—Deborah Witte and Bob Mihalek

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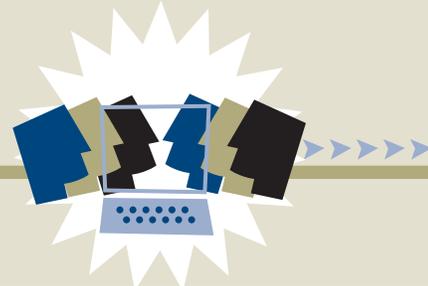
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Your Connection

This newsletter is called *Connections*. Why *Connections*? Who or what are we trying to connect? If you're at a loss to answer that question, we hope you won't be after reading the following new section, the "Readers' Forum."

When we thought about the title *Connections*, we realized there were few ways for you, the reader, to actually connect to or comment on the articles in this newsletter. Our idea is to provide a space, in print as well as online, for stories and reflections about our shared civic life. This space is the "Readers' Forum." As a way to get the ball rolling, we engaged a few of our readers around a couple of articles from this issue. We used the articles as common background for a conversation about how citizens relate to other citizens, how citizens work in community, and how citizens relate to officeholders or other professionals.

We held a series of four conversations with small groups of *Connections*' readers over a period of a week last April. We talked to community activists, policymakers, university professors, bureaucrats, nonprofit executives, and others just like you.

We learned a lot. Our readers shared how the articles related to their own experiences. They talked about the tensions and contradictions the articles surfaced. They gave us their best thinking. For example, an active NIF participant from Texas told us that, from her experience, some experts don't purposefully try to exclude citizens, but citizens often don't feel qualified to participate in some decisions. "By accident we've created a citizenry that doesn't know they're wanted, they're qualified, and that their values are all they need" to get involved, she said. Other participants spoke of the barriers created by special interests and suggested that special interests exist even in small communities and on local boards. They made it clear that special interests are not just a K Street phenomenon. You'll find these kinds of insights and more in the articles that follow.

The editors of *Connections* hope the "Readers' Forum" inspires you to engage with us around the ideas of citizens and their roles in democracy. We invite you to be a part of an experimental online discussion. Just log on to www.kettering.org and click on the "Readers' Forum" link. There you will find a community of citizens and scholars ready to discuss how they think about and practice the democratic arts. See you online.

—Bob Mihalek and Deborah Witte



What Citizens Can Do . . . and Can't

By Deborah Witte

Margie Loyacano was eager to attend her first school board meeting in New Lebanon, Ohio. She wanted to talk to board members about testing in the schools. The dialogue—such as it was—didn't last long. "They didn't want to hear what I had to say," she said. "They only wanted me to hear what they had to say."

Disappointed but not discouraged, she and other parents kept coming back. But nothing seemed to improve. As Loyacano saw it, the board became increasingly less responsive and more ineffective with each passing year. School levies failed repeatedly. School programs, such as art and music, were cut.

The parents were fed up. But they refused to give up. They decided they would have to step up and try to make the changes they wanted themselves. Although "we didn't always know what it was we should be doing," Loyacano said, they did succeed in making some small changes in the schools. The bigger change, however, was in the community. Citizens were coming together around their shared concerns, building a community, and creating a public.

Eventually the citizens of New Lebanon voted in new school board members. The new board invites the public in and works more willingly with citizens. Parents are participating in school activities and showing up for other community events. Other members of the community are attending programs as well. Even the school building is more open as seniors in

the community now use the hallways as a walking track.

While this tale of citizen action could be seen as simply a classic case of "throw the bums out," Loyacano observed, this story is not simply a case of bad behavior on the part of school board members. As another participant in our series of interviews for the "Readers' Forum" said, after listening to Loyacano's story, board members need to be supported by citizens when they take risks and tread into new territory. Board members need to know that citizens want to work with them.

"It may be," as Paloma Dallas points out in her article on citizen boards on page 19, "that citizen boards, in their efforts to be effective, have . . . excluded citizens, albeit unwittingly."

Grass Tops, Not Grass Roots

One community organizer from Helena, Arkansas, who works at the grass-

roots level trying to persuade citizens to speak up, struggles with the idea that deliberation empowers people. While she firmly believes in the process and has experienced people actually taking action to help themselves, she said she has also experienced everyday citizens finding themselves weeded out of the decision-making process, especially when the decisions are made around money.

She recalled a "heart-wrenching" experience in her community when civic engagement played a key role in the development of a plan to move the community into a more productive growth mode. Grassroots citizens were involved in the planning, but once the goals for the project were established, the citizens were denied the right to vote on them. This type of power grab makes it difficult for citizens to believe in any process.

The experience in Helena, the community organizer said, caused some



citizens to vow never again to participate in a community meeting. Moreover, these citizens learned that staff members from the development agency later commented that the planning process did not include the kind of citizens they desired; they were looking for the community's "grass tops," not the grass roots. One lesson she learned is that institutions can have a different idea of what it means to be a grassroots citizen. People will leave the poor out of decisions and still claim they've involved the grass roots in their efforts. The way some decisions are made in her community, she said, makes her think that at times "democracy is a farce."

Too often, this community organizer said, she and her colleagues find they have to apologize to citizens who have agreed to participate in community forums because their voices were discounted. It's hard to rally people to engage in the community's affairs, she said, because experience tells citizens that the outcome isn't likely to be what they wanted—when interest groups that know the ropes circumvent the wishes of the majority. "When you're working to empower people," she said, "they ought to get a little credit."

Sidetracking Citizens

Sad to say, other participants in our "Readers' Forum" interviews related all too easily to these stories. Yvonne Sims from Grand Rapids, Michigan, wondered whether people in power even want poor and less well educated citizens to vote, because so many impediments are put in their way. Before the last election in Grand Rapids, Sims explained, precincts were changed with little publicity. This caused considerable confusion on Election Day. But even when voters found their correct precincts, she said, poll workers often couldn't find people's names on the rolls. It left you with a bad feeling, she said. "But we'll hang in and vote no matter what."

Sims also told about an effort to rename a street in Grand Rapids for Martin Luther King Jr. The effort gained ground in community forums, attended by newspaper and television reporters who publicized the outcomes. Finally the recommendation to name the street Martin Luther King Jr. Drive was taken to the city commission. But the commission wasn't buying it. They found a "nice" way around

It's hard to rally people to engage in the affairs of the community when the outcome isn't what they wanted it to be—when interest groups who know the ropes circumvent the wishes of the majority.

what the people really wanted by giving the street the unofficial, and secondary, designation, Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Drive. The powerful listen nicely in Grand Rapids, Sims said, but the people see through them.

Sims shares the same dilemma as the community activist from the South. How can you help citizens learn that politicians don't have to agree with you, that they may not come to the same conclusion as you do about what should be done? The community steering committee on which Sims serves struggles with this question. Were the politicians really listening? If so, how could they sidetrack and trivialize what so many citizens clearly wanted?

Members of her steering committee, Sims said, wonder how they can encourage people to continue to participate in deliberative dialogue when their decisions can so easily be circumvented.

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Local Boards and Citizens: A Mixed Relationship

By Bob Mihalek

If our interviews for the "Readers' Forum" are any indication, the relationship between citizens and local boards is certainly mixed. Certainly we heard some success stories, such as Marjorie Loyacano's report on how citizens helped shape her local school board's public engagement efforts, "What Citizens Can Do . . . and Can't," which is retold on page 34.

But for every positive story, the people we interviewed told several more negative accounts. While by no means a representative sample, our interviews, nonetheless, show that not all public engagement efforts are sincere. Citizens perceive that some are orchestrated to manipulate the public or to get citizens to rubber-stamp officials' wishes.

Consider what Mike Robinette, a former director of the Miami Valley Regional Planning Commission in Dayton, Ohio, had to say during one interview. Robinette's agency, which is made up of numerous county and municipal govern-

ments and other entities in the region, was required to seek public input on issues with which it was dealing. Elected officials and the “elites,” as Robinette called them, would support the agency’s engagement effort “as long as they could control it.” But when they lost control of an issue—and its outcome—they would “push back.”

The agency’s efforts to engage citizens had other problems. Sometimes, after the agency would reach out to citizens, Robinette said, the organization’s members would ignore what citizens told them and move ahead with their own approach.

John Gordon, a former school superintendent who now works for the Arizona School Boards Association, told similar stories of insincere public engagement efforts. For instance, elected members of local boards—knowing how they wanted to respond to an issue—have instituted a public process solely to get the community to support their original plan. Perhaps worse is when a board forms a committee to lead the public through a deliberative process, but then ignores what the public has to say.

According to Migwe Kimemia, a staff member with the American Friends Service Committee in Ohio, the school board that oversees his children’s schools often ignores input from citizens and instead imposes its own policies on the community. The board “only comes to the community when they have a [tax] levy” on the ballot, he said.

Earning Credibility

One of the few positive reports from our “Readers’ Forum” interviews came from Yvonne Sims, a longtime National Issues Forums organizer in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Government officials in Grand Rapids say that NIF forums are valuable because they are the only place officials can hear from citizens who are not lobbying for or complaining about something, Sims

explained. Hearing what citizens have to say has also helped shape officials’ decisions. For instance, when city and county commissioners asked the Grand Rapids NIF steering committee to assist with a forum on violence in their community, they expected the normal turnout of 50 or 60 people. Instead, 300 community members showed up. While the crowd size was impressive, more significant

Boards that do not engage the public and actively listen to their concerns are usually busy “putting out fires” or dealing with the “tyranny of the urgent” all the time.

were the results of the forum. As participants deliberated about the problem of violence, they raised a related concern about unemployment in their community. More acutely aware of this connection, the commissioners partnered with local employers to organize job fairs.

Linda Hoke, the director of the Council on the Southern Community at the Southern Growth Policies Board, a think tank concerned with economic development issues in the South, noted that the organization regularly engages citizens about issues that concern them. These public practices give the agency credibility with both policymakers and the public. Policymakers, Hoke said, have come to believe Southern Growth’s work is “more rooted in reality.” Instead of convening

blue-ribbon panels, the organization gathers citizens to talk about economic-related issues in their communities.

Main Street’s Special Interests

Why did we hear so few success stories? Gordon pointed to the boards themselves, emphasizing that local governing boards need to have “sustained leadership” to develop and maintain an interest in engaging the public. This approach has to be “institutionalized” so it can continue after the boards experience changes in leadership, he said. Establishing a policy of public engagement also helps create conditions in which new board members acknowledge that a system is in place. Boards that do not engage the public and actively listen to their concerns, Gordon said, are usually busy “putting out fires” or dealing with the “tyranny of the urgent” all the time.

Kim Sebaly, an associate professor in the Department of Education Foundations and Special Services at Kent State University in Ohio, said boards shouldn’t wait until a crisis arises to engage citizens on policy issues. In fact, he said, engaging citizens could help boards avoid some crises. “It doesn’t do any good to jump from crisis to crisis,” Sebaly said.

Many local boards “don’t have the wherewithal to function and deliberate in a good manner,” Gordon said. He cited several reasons for his analysis: boards fail to listen to the public, they are too influenced by special interests, and they are obligated to follow mandates by federal and state governments. Furthermore, he said, some boards are pulled by “so many different factions.” The divisions on some boards run so deep, Gordon said, they can’t even elect a board president.

Divisions on local boards are often based on political disagreements. Sebaly contended that school boards, in particular, are highly politicized. For instance, he said, many school board members serve

on boards to protect or advance a particular agenda. Some citizens then respond to this by running to advance their own interests or backing a candidate who supports their own agenda. This circular gamesmanship keeps groups from talking to one another about how to solve their community's problems.

Indeed, our "Readers' Forum" interviews underscore the point that special interests are not just a K Street phenomenon—they are also a problem in local politics. As Gordon noted, many people run for office because they want to promote a particular interest, get someone out of office, or use their service on a local board as a stepping stone to higher office.

Leadership by Example

Cronyism is another problem that can plague local boards. Kimemia described the neighborhood association system in Dayton, where he lives, which is supposed to serve as a way for citizens to get involved in their local government. But when he first got interested in the system, which includes seven neighborhood boards, it was club-like and filled with insiders who knew one another. Citizens would call meetings, and leaders on the neighborhood boards would not show up.

"We had a leadership crisis," he said. You could not find "authentic leadership," which, he said, all boards need to be effective. He defined "authentic leadership" as leadership that has "vision and passion for the community, which is deeply rooted in trying to show leadership by example" and is removed from special interests.

Valerie Lemmie, a former city manager who now serves as chair of the Board of Directors of the National Academy of Public Administration, said boards that want to engage the public need to identify issues that directly affect people. Instead of asking citizens to comment on budgets

or how City Hall is managed, she said, officials should bring citizens in to discuss things that affect their lives, issues that bother or concern them.

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Putting the Public Back into Public Administration

By Deborah Witte and Bob Mihalek

Most public administrators think their job is to manage an institution. But, in fact, they're responsible for building community.

That's what one administrator, Jim Ley, who oversees a county government in Florida, said during one of our group interviews for the "Readers' Forum." It's a striking statement because it gets at the heart of the disconnect often found between administrators and the public. If administrators are managing an institution, it becomes easy to view people as the clients to be served. But if they are building community, then citizens are partners critical to their success.

Ley, a 33-year veteran, acknowledged his role in perpetuating the customer-service model found in many public agencies. The problem is there's "no reward for risk," he said, so public officials simply do what they've always done, and that means continuing to focus on service. "Eighty percent of the people in this profession are maintenance managers," Ley said.

The administrative profession, he said, does not celebrate those managers and agency directors who have embraced public engagement and made it a part of their governments' regular routines.



Indeed, our interviews with several current and former government administrators and school superintendents made it clear that the customer-service model has become pervasive in government agencies at least in part because administrators have become complacent. Ley, for instance, wasn't the only one in the "Readers' Forum" interviews who described the timidity found in the administrative profession.

Charlie Irish, a retired school superintendent from Ohio, said there's a "great fear on the part of school officials to act differently from how they have always acted," a statement that could have easily been made by a city manager or county administrator. Somehow public officials need to be inspired to take risks, they need something that will "take that fear away," Irish said.

Ley is trying to get officials in his county government to act differently. For the last few years, he said, the government has been trying to "break through the old model" that sees citizens as customers and take a new view that sees citizens as stakeholders. He said this type of change is difficult to implement because the boards that oversee public governments approach problems differently than citizens might and often prefer to satisfy people rather than engage them about problems.

"Throwing money at [a problem] makes the board feel good," Ley said. "It's quick, easy, and gets good editorial responses." He has found that his board wants to create clients because "it's easier to give than to engage." While this may be a quick and expedient method, he said, "it doesn't solve a thing."

Kim Sebal, an associate professor in the Department of Education Foundations and Special Services at Kent State University in Ohio, wondered whether citizens really want something other than the customer-service model. After all, he

said, it's comfortable for citizens as well as for public officials. He suggested that we need to know more about the other side of the coin we call bureaucracy; we need to know more about citizens who don't engage. Are citizens simply lazy?

Price of Being Too Good

The customer-service model allows professional government staff to play the role of experts responsible for solving their communities' problems, crises, and challenges. Experts often respond to problems by saying, "this is our job," we will tackle this issue because that's the "way the system works," Irish said. This attitude creates a disconnect between professional admin-

The customer-service model has become pervasive in government agencies at least in part because administrators have become complacent.

istrators and citizens, who are basically told, there's nothing for you to do here.

Irish compared this mentality to the complaint that Washington, D.C.'s "Inside-the-Beltway" culture is disconnected from the rest of the country. Beltway mentalities also have emerged in communities around the country, he said, leaving citizens outside looking in and feeling powerless to make decisions in their community because, they believe, that authority belongs to those on the inside.

Mike Robinette, a former director of the Miami Valley Regional Planning Commission in Dayton, Ohio, said experts either *do* have all the answers or think that's the case, so they see citizens as "roadblocks."

He told the story of an attempt to regionalize the 911 emergency call service in a large Ohio county. Everything he knows professionally as an administrator told him that this move would be good for all the communities involved: it would save each municipality money and manpower and allow them to pool their resources and improve services.

From the perspective of public officials, there seemed to be no downsides to the plan. But when the plan was presented to the public, they balked. While the public understood all the benefits of a regional 911 plan, they valued their security more and were concerned that a regional emergency system would treat them as a number while being less effective. They were concerned that what they saw as a large bureaucratic system would actually make them less secure, so they pushed back. To his colleagues' way of thinking, the citizens had prevented progress.

The complacency that one interview participant described as plaguing the administration profession could be blamed on the fact that the profession itself is full of skilled, well-meaning administrators. They have become experts in running agencies, municipalities, and counties. Administrators "have gotten too good at what we do," Ley, the county administrator in Florida, said. "We have gotten too good at solving problems, and we have forgotten about engaging citizens."

Leaving Citizens Out

Listening to the public and getting the public's input is often put off because of time constraints, admitted John Gordon,

a former school superintendent who now works for the Arizona School Boards Association. Similarly, several people who participated in our interviews described how local boards of education often fail to hear the voices of their citizens. They find it difficult to function in a deliberative manner because they are sometimes factionalized. Often, they only want citizens to rubber-stamp their decisions.

Jule Zimet, an active National Issues Forums participant in El Paso, Texas, said that experts don't purposefully try to exclude citizens, but in some decisions, citizens don't feel qualified to participate. "By accident we've created a citizenry that doesn't know they're wanted, they're qualified, and that their values are all they need" to get involved, she said.

Adding to the many pressures already facing administrators are special interests that work hard to rally around pet issues. Ley said issue advocates have taken over the role experts often play on issues that concern them. When public officials open up a process for citizen participation, he said, issue advocates can often dominate that space, squeezing out the citizens. Not surprisingly, public administrators find it easier to relate to special interests. At the same time, public officials are drawn to advocates, which also leaves citizens behind.

Ley recalled one effort his administration launched in which citizens were invited to participate in small-group conversations around the county. These weren't your typical conversations because they focused on involving people who were not considered the "usual suspects." However, once a local arts organization got a handle on the engagement process the county was using, the arts organization's members attempted to take over the process "because their agenda wasn't showing up" in the conversations.

Robinette, the former regional planning director in Dayton, presented this

problem in simple terms: public officials don't know what strategies they should use to engage citizens, so they approach advocates.

"Breaking Chains and Locks"

If administrators are going to embrace citizen participation as part of their work, said Sebal, the Kent State professor, they need to learn to make a "mental shift." He suggested that public agencies are really "expert agencies." He wondered, how do you turn expert-based agencies into citizen-based agencies?

Making such a monumental change in most government bureaucracies is bound to be difficult. Robinette reflected that there was no institutional structure to facilitate a process that gets two sides talking about an issue. There is no way to begin to craft a different relationship between agent and citizen, where each could begin to understand what the other holds valuable. More than simply a mental shift, he saw the need for structural change. He asked himself, how far could he go, as an expert, in disengaging from the accepted procedures of his profession? Where could his roles as bureaucrat and citizen merge?

As Ley said, you have to "break chains and locks" and create discomfort in an organization to change it.

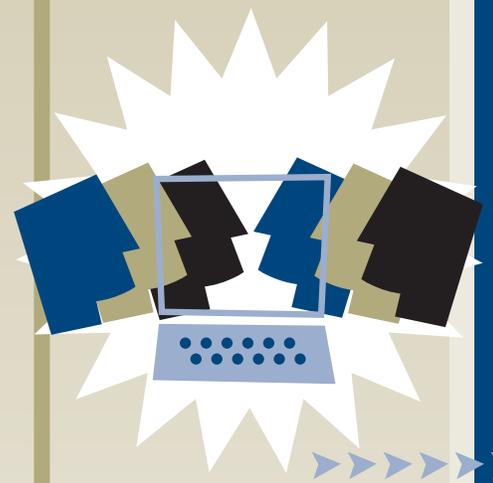
But the only way there's going to be a "real dynamic structural change" within institutions, Robinette said, is through grassroots citizen involvement. Those who run public institutions protect both the status quo and themselves, so it's up to citizens to demand change. Unless citizens "wake up and get engaged," he said, "we're going to struggle to go forward."

READERS' FORUM

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The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to "the problems behind the problems."

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Seven major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

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