KETTERING REVIEW

A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving
the quality of public life in the American democracy

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REVIEW

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Democracy Beyond the Ballot Box

By Valerie Lemmie

The roles of city managers and elected officials need to be radically reshaped.

I entered public service because I believed in the power of government to solve society's problems by redistributing resources and stepping in to correct injustices. I came to see firsthand the immense structural and practical obstacles public administrators face when they attempt to tackle the "wicked problems" of communities. I now believe that the roles of city managers and elected officials need to be radically reshaped. And I have gradually come to understand that an essential component is missing from the equation: citizen engagement.

The notion of citizenship is very real to my family and runs deep through my understanding of American public life. Like most African Americans of my generation, religion was an integral part of my upbringing, and my childhood church was often a meeting place to discuss key community issues and political events. The importance of civic engagement, political participation, and voting was routinely advocated by our minister, and I can still hear his voice asking the congregation, "Do you know there is an election coming up? Do you know what the issues are? Have you registered to vote? You know you can't change things if you don't get involved, don't you?"

While I was too young to participate in the litigation or civil disobedience phases of the Civil Rights Movement, I am of the generation that subsequently integrated public facilities and institutions, and I have vivid memories of the violence, pain, anger, and frustration that a Jim Crow society visited on African Americans.

I represented the first generation of African Americans to attend integrated schools after the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board*

of Education directed the integration of public schools in segregated states and in 1955 ruled in what is known as *Brown II*, that public school integration proceed "with all deliberate speed." Within a few years, I would join the school-age children, both African American and White, in school districts being integrated and realize the dream of my parents and grandparents of living in an integrated society where Blacks and Whites had the same rights and opportunities. I would become one of "the talented tenth," as described by W.E.B. DuBois in 1903—that small group of college-educated African Americans who would pursue social change and, he predicted, save the race.

When I entered the University of Missouri in 1969, 1 of only about 100 African American undergraduates in a student population of about 28,000 Whites, little had changed since 1954. Fraternities donned Confederate army uniforms and serenaded white "southern belles." African Americans stuck together for safety; you didn't stray too far from campus for fear you might not make it back. Many professors still challenged African Americans' presence in class because "Blacks were inferior" and didn't

need a college education, so I was repeatedly asked, "Why are you here?" and "Don't you know your place?" My response was that I was an American and had the right and qualifications to be there. There was too much at stake to let somebody turn me around, so I sucked it up and decided to use this experience as preparation for life in the real world, beyond the boundaries of the campus.

I was ecstatic when I landed my first full-time job after graduate school in a city department that was the successor to the Model Cities Program and the social policy arm of local government. I couldn't wait to fix problems, ensure good government through improved efficiency and economy, and help people get on with their lives. Armed with the desire to do good works and cause no harm, I began my public service career with the city of Kansas City, Missouri, as a starry-eyed idealist, believing government

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had a responsibility to level the playing field between the "haves" and the "have-nots," to ensure equal access and opportunity for all.

When I entered public service, metropolitan areas in the United States were well on their way to widespread adoption of the council-manager

form of government, which reflected the efforts of Progressive Era reformers to rescue local government from political machines and the corruption they often represented. Since I had grown up in St. Louis, a city with a strong Democratic party machine, I knew both this system's

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benefits—personalized response to complaints and encouragement of participation in party activities—and downsides—salary kickbacks to the party, graft, inefficiency, disparate service delivery, and little investment in the city's future. I saw that cities that adopted the council-manager plan brought scientific management and professionalism, helping to ensure organizational efficiency, effectiveness, economy, and equity in service delivery and decision-making.

Today, the council-manager plan is the dominant model of city management in the United States and the context for my career in public service. Armed with confidence and optimism, I found my work as a city manager immensely rewarding. Yet all too soon, I came to realize that I had to do more than just manage day-to-day operations. My role and that of hundreds of other city managers was evolving, and I found I would need to lead more and manage less. Increasingly, I was being called upon by elected officials to improve government performance, to do more with less, and

to make our government more customer-service friendly. This was their way of responding to citizens who were complaining about city government. Under attack, they responded by applying more steam—demanding more managerial competence, which they believed would make citizens happier. They were out in the community, interacting with citizens, and as described by Daniel Yankelovich, they knew their constituents were not in a good mood.

What they were beginning to see, though they may not have recognized it, was a disconnect between people and their leaders.

I did not yet understand, though, that I, too, was part of the problem. There are structural, institutional, and organic reasons for the disconnect between citizens and their government, and one of them, going back over a century, was the advent of the "professional" or "expert" in local government, in the form of the city manager. For too long, we have assumed that improving government efficiency, like building

a better car, was the answer. Government is not in the business of making cars or some other product; it is the mechanism by which citizens run a democracy, which can be a messy process. To exclude citizens from the work of government is to invite frustration, and worse.

In the cities I managed, city council members looked to me to ameliorate popular discontent and to create a higher-performing city organization. Their logic was simple: If we did a better job, citizens would feel better about us. In council-manager governments, elected officials set policy and the city manager executes it and manages the delivery of city services, presumably effectively, efficiently, and with economy. But, while charters define the responsibilities of the city manager and his or her relationship to elected officials and staff, they are silent on the manager's relationship with citizens. And one effect of this model has been elevating the value of technical expertise over citizens' expertise, further distancing citizens from their local government.

Having spent my career working through public and nonprofit organizations to improve the quality of life in urban communities, I eventually became frustrated by the paralysis that infected these institutions and their inability to effectively address those issues that were of most concern to citizens. More and more, the relationship of citizens to their local government became one of conflict, confrontation, and polarization over issues. Terms such as "not in my backyard" and "not during my term of office" reflected the inability of citizens and their political leaders to reach consensus on difficult, controversial issues, and more important, highlighted the

growing distance between elected officials and citizens in solving community problems.

As city manager, I struggled to find the appropriate balance between ensuring organizational effectiveness, efficiency, and economy on

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the one hand and encouraging and sustaining active citizen engagement on the other, in ways that would be meaningful, productive, and acceptable to elected officials and citizens. This was a struggle for me because there was little institutional, political, or professional support for engaging citizens in ways other than endorsing decisions and plans already made in city hall on their behalf. Most elected officials saw their roles as representatives, much as the Federalists Hamilton and Madison (in his early days) did—as a privileged elite making decisions on behalf of the masses. City staff saw themselves as expert owners of their respective agencies or departments and viewed citizen engagement as meddling or interference. They had limited tolerance for it beyond a public hearing, community meeting,

or press conference during which they would present their expert recommendations and explain why suggestions from the public were unacceptable—usually as being too expensive, time-consuming, or technically impossible.

Citizens were also hesitant to get involved, even when I invited them, believing they would be patronized, their views ignored, or they would be used as a rubber stamp to make unpopular decisions ostensibly more palatable to the larger citizen community.

So here we were: stuck in a morass of inaction and indifference, blaming and finger-pointing and getting nowhere with respect to building a common understanding of the issues and challenges facing the community—which loomed larger every day. Citizens were absent from the democratic process, and democracy wasn't working without them. Professional expertise, political acumen, and all the good will and best intentions of public officials proved insufficient to fix wicked community problems without citizens at the table. Polls, surveys, focus

groups, and blue-ribbon committees were a poor and insufficient substitute for direct citizen engagement in the governance process.

It was clear to me something different had to be done to reduce the distance and enhance the connections between citizens and their government that the council-manager plan did not adequately address. Over time, and with practice, I came to understand that I could play an important role in improving citizen-government relationships and connections by finding the neutral territory, or public space, if you will, at which elected officials, city staff, and citizens come together, play a shared role, and take collective responsibility for doing public work.

Gradually, I began to realize that the key to fixing wicked community problems was role redefinition: elected officials were going to have to learn how to share power with citizens; citizens had to move from spectators to participants; bureaucracies had to learn to value deliberation and collaboration in equal measure to its value

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of efficiency; professional staff had to develop the skill set needed to develop and then practice deliberation and collaboration and then measure both; and city managers would have to align professional practices with citizenship practices, including helping to define which problems citizens should address, how they get
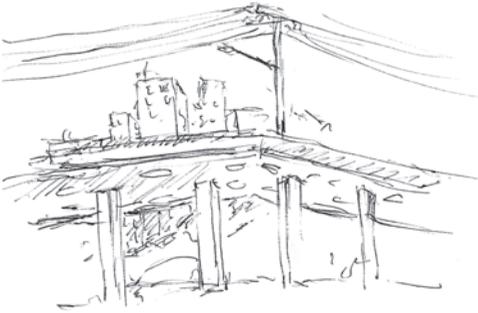
engaged, how they make sound decisions, and what happens once citizens act collectively with government. Most important of all, city managers need to help create the environment where citizen input into the decision-making process is valued. They must educate the community, elected officials, and staff on ways to make it happen and then lead the change.

My argument is that citizen engagement is not merely nice or noble or idealistic. It is pragmatic and essential. Our recent history teaches us that we can't fix those wicked problems in the community or set reasonable expectations

for the solutions without them. Citizens have to be actively involved with government for community problems to be resolved over the long term, and that means we in government have to do things differently. It means we must value economy, efficiency, effectiveness, equity (in participation), and engagement of citizens. This requires more time and the loss of some power, but in return, gives us better solutions, participation, and commitment from citizens in fixing community problems as well as greater satisfaction for everyone because government and citizens are working in partnership to address key community issues.

Valerie Lemmie joined the Kettering Foundation as the director of exploratory research after a distinguished career in public service. A former city manager, public utility commissioner, and adjunct professor, she is a fellow of the National Academy and chair of the board of the National Civic League. This piece is drawn from her 2008 report, Democracy Beyond the Ballot Box: A New Role for Elected Officials, City Managers, and Citizens.

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