How the Community Works

Officeholder Perspectives on Democratic Self-Government and the Community

By

H. George Frederickson

AN OCCASIONAL PAPER OF THE KETTERING FOUNDATION WITH THE COMMUNITY STUDIES WORKSHOP OF THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS
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The Community Studies Workshop at the University of Kansas had two goals when it began the study described in the following report. This group of distinguished professors and students wanted to know how local public officials see and relate to their communities in their everyday duties. And they wanted to know how these leaders view their communities when they are faced with solving a problem.

The authors took up this research because they, like many scholars, believe that our public officials have been “better institution-builders than community-builders.” This area of research is of particular concern to the Kettering Foundation, which has long been interested in why citizens have come to feel so disconnected from many of the institutions that serve the public. Elected and nonelected officials alike must be troubled by findings that citizens believe that government often does things to them rather than for or with them.

The Community Studies Workshop makes some important observations that will likely resonate with frustrated citizens as well as public officials who are struggling to relate better to the public. After interviewing 60 elected and nonelected officials, the group concluded, “There are only rare examples that show local public officials regarding generalized or nonpolicy-specific dialogue with citizens to be an essential element in community-building.”

In an age when it seems talk is everywhere – on television, radio, the Internet, the cell phone – talk for the sake of learning with the people who govern us, it seems, is in short supply. And why is that?

“Officials who try to solve problems tend to see the processes
of talking and listening as time consuming and rather inefficient,” these authors conclude.

While there’s undoubtedly much truth in the observation that talking through problems can be tedious, no one ever promised that democracy would be efficient. And as H. George Frederickson and his colleagues point out, there is an important trade-off to putting efficiency ahead of all else in a democracy. “What passes for efficiency often is purchased at a considerable cost in either citizen apathy or hostility.” Of course, a well-functioning democracy can’t afford either a hostile citizenry or one that doesn’t care about how things are going.

This paper suggests officeholders and government officials have reason to consider that their responsibility is something more than just enhancing and supporting the institution of government. An “institutional paradigm” focuses on efficiency, laws, and revenue, among other things, but ignores the important but less tangible necessity of building community. Implicit in this idea is that citizens are more than simply interest groups, constituents, or voters who have to be mollified and served. The “community paradigm” looks to citizens as participants and resources for confronting issues and solving problems.

The Community Studies group also offers a hopeful thought. “We are passing from the period of the diagnosis of the weaknesses and limitations of the city as an institution,” the researchers write, “... to the early stages of prescription.” And what is their prescription? Healthy communities require “returning to community, investing in civic capital, and building civic capacity.” These terms have an academic ring to them, but they are not hard to understand. Central to each of the concepts is the notion of tapping the power of individual citizens.

In this research, the Community Studies Workshop also names, if you will, three types of communities, each of which tends to act in different ways. Distinguishing between “communities of place,” “communities of ideas,” and “communities of circumstance” may help public officials see how different groups of citizens approach a problem.

None of us could imagine living in a society where institu-
tions didn't have an important place. Institutions put police on the street, pick up our garbage, and make sure our water is safe to drink. They are “necessary but not sufficient to a satisfying civic life.”

But read this report and think about your own community. Do the institutions get all of the attention in your community, or are your leaders dedicated to building a network of citizen organizations? Then think about the truly vexing issues that face your town and consider a final thought from these scholars:

“It is contentious issues that cause communities to turn to institutions and institutions to turn to communities for solutions.”

**Ellen Belcher**

*Ellen Belcher is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation.*
INTRODUCTION

Community and the Problem of Clashing Paradigms

In the autumn of 1995, the Kettering Foundation organized a Public-Government Workshop as the first of a series of annual meetings to explore what was described as the disconnect between elected and appointed local government officials on one hand, and the public and community groups on the other. The workshop was linked, primarily through overlapping membership, to the annual meetings of the Democratic Practices Forum of the National League of Cities, a group of a dozen or so mayors and city council members. The workshops have included mayors, city council members, city managers, and professors.

Among the Public-Government Workshop participants were representatives of the Community Studies Workshop at the University of Kansas. These researchers have drawn from their experience, as well as from additional research, to prepare this report.

The two annual meetings were established shortly after a 1995 report by The Harwood Group, *The Citizen-Officeholder Relationship: A View from Elected Officials*, was released by the Kettering Foundation. The Harwood Group found that elected officials:

1. believe they merely need to be more accessible to citizens;
2. wish to do a better job of listening;
3. wish to do a better job of explaining their actions;
4. believe that public frustration stems from big problems such as the economy, crime, or stagnant personal incomes;
5. believe that the media fuels public frustration;
6. believe that the public has become more active in expressing frustration and is now much less civil in these expressions;
7. believe that their own relationship with the public is fine – problems stem from “those public officials over there,” including their peers and especially bureaucrats;
8. wish to seek public input so as to better manage tough issues and situations; and
9. believe that conversation, and particularly informal conversation, is the best form of contact between elected officeholders and the public.

It was evident in the Harwood study – and has been in more recent studies – that elected officials believed citizens should be much more active in public affairs, in making choices, and in setting priorities on public issues. It was also evident that current forms of interaction between citizens and elected officials were insufficient to the problems at hand. Yet few elected officials believed there was a need for a “fundamentally different type of relationship with citizens.” The Harwood study concluded that elected officials have a keen understanding of and respect for political institutions, but they have little understanding of the public in any sense other than as interest groups, individual voters, or individuals pursuing their self-interest through government. Put another way, elected officials appear to view the relationship from the perspective of an institutional paradigm.

Faced with mounting evidence of a sharp decline in trust of both government and public officials, and in view of the Harwood findings, the Kettering Public-Government Workshop and the National League of Cities Democratic Practices Forum have taken a new approach to the disconnect between government agencies and officials on the one hand, and the public on the other.

The Kettering Public-Government Workshop approach could best be described as paradigmatic. Because the characteristics and language of institutions are so pervasive in government and business, it is safe to conclude that there is a broadly accepted
institutional paradigm. (While the word “institution” has several meanings, it is used here to mean formal institutions. It is not used in its cultural anthropological meaning – patterns of informal behavior, as in courtship rituals as an institution.)

Along with the benefits of the use of the institutional paradigm have come the weaknesses and limitations of that paradigm. The city as a governmental institution is often slow, impersonal, rule bound, and political. The city seems to be of most interest to those seeking office, those working for the city, and those seeking greater benefits or reduced costs. This is the city as the provider of services. What passes for efficiency often is purchased at a considerable cost in either citizen apathy or hostility.

Across the country there are signs of a yearning for community, a feeling that institutions are necessary but not sufficient to a satisfying civic life. We are passing from the period of the diagnosis of the weaknesses and limitations of the city as an institution (“bowling alone,” individual rights trump collective responsibilities, negative politics, negative media, lawlessness, unresponsive institutions, the disconnect between the city as an institution and the citizen) to the early stages of prescription. In broad terms, that prescription means returning to community, investing in civic capital, and building civic capacity. There are modern examples of community-building as in the case of Tupelo, Mississippi. There are also examples of building the idea of community. Can we build a community paradigm, based on experience and logic, as useful and compelling as the institutional paradigm?

The Public-Government Workshop believes the answer is yes. One step toward building a community paradigm is to define what is meant by the word-idea community. This is accomplished by comparing city – an institutional paradigm – and the word-ideas that guide that paradigm with the word-ideas that describe a community paradigm. The following table sets out such a comparison. It is important to understand that these are paradigms that are being compared. This does not mean that they are necessarily competitive paradigms. They may be, if the key features of one paradigm drive out the key features of the other. But we contend that the modern city-community requires the implementation of an effective institutional paradigm and the implementation of an effective community paradigm.
There is little doubt, however, that in the contemporary city we have been better institution-builders than community-builders. One reason for this is the comparative absence of an agreed-upon community paradigm, complicated by the changing nature of contemporary communities.⁵

Participants in the Kettering Public-Government Workshop seemed to hold the shared belief that the city frames, sustains, and encourages the community, while community is the primary connection between the citizens and the city. The city, the school district, and the county are formal continuing institutions – local democratic self-government in practice. This is the world of jurisdiction, taxes, elections, officials, and authority – the procedural republic, a well-known world, easy to see and describe. By comparison, community is difficult to see and therefore to describe, a subtle and elusive idea.

Based on both the Public-Government Workshop and Democratic Practices Forum deliberations, researchers at the Community Studies Workshop have developed the following comparison of the community and the city as an institution.

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<th>Subject</th>
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In the presentation of our research findings, the Community Studies Workshop will use the language and ideas suggested in this comparison of the city as a jurisdiction and an institution and the community as groups of citizens cooperating to define their collective interests and working together to achieve those interests. Because we know more about the city as a jurisdiction and an institution and comparatively less about the community, the community is the focus of our research.

From data based on case analysis and in-depth interviewing, we report the view, experiences, and opinions of approximately 60 local public officials, either mayors or city managers. (See Appendix for methodological details.)

**Section I. How to “See” the Community**

From their institutional perspective, local public officials see the community as primarily manifest in neighborhood groups and associations, neighborhood and block watch groups, business and civic clubs, and association and interest groups such as Chambers of Commerce. This is a literal community seen in specific and concrete rather than abstract terms. This literal community comprises established and continuing citizen groups and associations – face-to-face collectives with shared and common interests that are relevant to the institutional work of public officials. To mayors, these groups are important factors in the jurisdiction, the polity, the political life of the city. This is the community that mayors see as groups of constituents and
that managers see as representing preferences, established interests, and the status quo.

Although I support participatory democracy and have long advocated neighborhood input into municipal policy-making, the homeowner groups I have seen are special interest oriented and self-serving. They are not constructive for the community and are interested only in their own problems. Although they have no concern for the city as a whole, they have become very powerful and influential.

- William J. Pitstick, executive director, North Central Texas Council of Governments

I think that some of them have unrealistic expectations and they don't necessarily take responsibility for their own choices.

- Karen Messerli, mayor, Lee's Summit, Missouri

Who is going to oppose it? The ordinance will be opposed by the landlords. There are so many landlords, they have formed an organization. The landlord's association will oppose it because it stops their opportunity to grow. They should be quiet though, because a rent cap is going to increase the value of the properties. You limit the supply of anything that is growing and the value goes up.

- Harold Godwin, mayor, Newark, Delaware

Local public officials see community in a second and equally important way, although they seldom use community as a word or idea in describing this view of the community. Virtually all the mayors and city managers describe and believe in a greater good or a common interest that benefits the jurisdiction or the region. Mayors speak in terms of “the people” or “the city” as a thing with values, attitudes, preferences. They see this collective as dynamic, malleable, conflicted, and sometimes volatile. Mayors often think it is their role to attempt to make or achieve a kind of general community of interest out of varied and often competitive interests and preferences. They perceive that it is their work to frame a greater good, to build or form the coalitions necessary to
achieve their view of this greater good. They “see” a possible community emerging as a result of political leadership.

We had 109 people on the committee meeting to talk about the future of our Downtown Waterfront. Developers were sitting next to environmentalists. And out of that discussion came a sense that we wanted to assure that the waterfront was a place that meets residents’ needs with an understanding that tourists would continue to enjoy the environment created. In the beginning, there was no agreement. So we got ahead of the problem and opened it up for discussion. I think usually a response of getting ahead of whatever the problem is, or recognizing problems seen often enough that we can deal with them. Because of this we are a much better community.

- Harriet Miller, mayor, Santa Barbara, California

City managers, too, have a broad and comprehensive concept of a possible community understood in terms of a common public interest or greater good. Unlike mayors, city managers tend to see their role as problem solvers, facilitators, mediators, educators, and constructors of dialogue – but almost always toward a generalized greater good.

I think it is important that people bring to local government a sense of ideals, a view that they are there to serve the community so that all of the people benefit.

- Jan Perkins, city manager, Fremont, California

Who is doing the work that makes people respect their government and become committed to making life in their communities better? The crucial issue is how local governments stay legitimate in the eyes of those they serve.

- Karma Ruder, director of the Neighborhood Planning Office, Seattle, Washington

Local public officials see the community at two levels, the literal community made up of near-at-hand groups and organizations that represent specific community neighborhoods and
interests and the possible community described in terms of a generalized public interest or greater good. When they see the literal community, public officials tend to use the language of community—participation, listening, consensus, involvement, stakeholding. When they see the possible community, mayors tend to use the institutional language of politics—constituents, representation, ordinances, elections—but city managers tend to use the institutional language of administration—efficiency, services, problem solving. Mayors and city managers, each in their own language, see a possible community.

We spend an inordinate amount of time in the city of Leavenworth taking care of barking dogs and sidewalks instead of looking beyond the end of our nose and saying, what can we do to position ourselves to be a more viable community? It is a real quality-of-life issue in my opinion.

- H.B. Weeks, mayor, Leavenworth, Kansas

I think many people who live outside the city limits move into the city because they see the benefits. The benefits are economic. You get more for your money living in the city than you do living in the county. You stack up what you pay every year in costs, in taxes, and so forth and you wind up miles ahead living in the city. The character of the town is another plus, I think. But, that's what we're trying to protect, that's what we're concerned about. When you drive through the city of Newark we don't want you to see empty shells and ask, What happened here?

- Harold Godwin, mayor, Newark, Delaware

I am increasingly convinced that we are accountable for more than the quality of our management. We are also accountable for how well we have performed in the governance of our communities. Our jobs are to assure a fundamentally productive combination of the two [politics and administration] in the daily life of local governments. We need to be more specific about the responsibility we carry for governance as well as for service delivery.

- Eric Anderson, city manager, Des Moines, Iowa
Section II. Talking, Listening, and Reasoning Together

Local public officials see both the literal and the possible community through listening and talking. While there are patterns of generalized community listening and talking, we find that most often this listening and talking is policy specific, having to do with particular problems or issues. Because of this, local officials’ views of community are often bound up with their views or positions on policy questions. It is not uncommon, therefore, for the mayor or city manager to see policy conflict, ambivalence, and frustration regarding a particular policy problem, yet also see or believe that there is an effectively functioning community.

Officials who try to solve problems tend to see the processes of talking and listening as time consuming and rather inefficient. Mayors tend to describe talking and listening as an opportunity to persuade, to explain, to hear opinions, and to learn where individuals and groups stand on issues. They appear to be learning from elements in the community, articulating already-held policy positions, and trying to determine policy positions, but they seem to focus more on persuading than on listening.

Early on the first year, perhaps there was an uneasy cordiality. After that they became more intimately involved in my administration through appointments to boards and commissions and my constant dialogue with them. And so they finally understood.
- Emmanuel Cleaver, former mayor, Kansas City, Missouri

City managers tend to attempt to structure discourse partly, it appears, to make discourse more efficient or focused. There is also a strong problem-solving quality to city managers’ views of discourse. Put another way, both mayors and city managers regard the processes of discourse as primarily policy deliberation involving citizens for the purpose of specific problem solving.

We connect with our community through other departments as well, in day-to-day services, and in special meetings in the
neighborhoods. Often residents will schedule a meeting in a neighborhood, invite a council member and various city staff, and discuss issues and problems which are of concern to them. The dialogue is important, and our response to them is critical. We always return to them with feedback about the problems they discuss with us, whether it is a drug problem in the neighborhood, overcrowding, or abandoned cars.

- Jan Perkins, city manager, Fremont, California

I crafted the process for the resolution of the problem. I was setting up the process by which an outcome can be achieved.

- Eric Anderson, city manager, Des Moines, Iowa

You have to start out real early identifying who has a stake in the outcome and who can prevent a resolution from happening. Get those parties involved early and make sure everybody understands the issues. About 90 percent of the time we were able to work through these issues and get general agreement.

- Larry Blick, city manager, Independence, Missouri

There are only rare examples that show local public officials regarding generalized or nonpolicy-specific dialogue with citizens to be an essential element in community-building.

Mayors and city managers both tend to understand that listening and learning are forms of interaction between officials and citizens or citizen groups. It is less often the case that local officials understand that citizen discourse is primarily between and among citizens and citizen groups. In this sense, public officials are institutional, representing authority and office while they seek citizen views and opinions. Some city managers and mayors, however, attempt to fashion forms of community dialogue that are at least semiautonomous from officials and authority. Under these circumstances, mayors and managers see themselves as facilitators of community dialogue, independent of formal city institutions— as simply observers or perhaps umpires. Nevertheless, this community dialogue tends to be policy specific.
To constantly serve as a healer. Constantly bringing people to the table who have never been in the room, let alone at the table. And so what we’ve been able to do is to bring labor, minorities, clergy, and business leaders to the table and this is the first time in the history of the city that all of those people have been at the table.

- Emmanuel Cleaver, former mayor, Kansas City, Missouri

Section III. The Instrumental Community

Local public officials see both the literal and the possible community in practical, applied, and instrumental terms. In this respect, they are deeply institutional. Their work is almost always policy- or issue-specific. Notions of community effectiveness are almost always associated with positive results or favorable outcomes.

Well, we had a murder. It happened in lower State Street, which is an area with a number of bars and a lot of activity and noise. What we did was to appoint a task force made up of some of the antialcohol people, some of the bar people, and then some citizens. We then worked on trying to communicate with each other, trying to determine the problems. We set up an alcohol servers’ training program so the bartenders would recognize when they should send people home. The antialcohol group wanted to make the program mandatory, and we refused to do that. We said we would do it on a voluntary basis. I think it has created a very good feeling on the part of bartenders and owners and the community, so I think it has been a good thing.

- Harriet Miller, mayor, Santa Barbara, California

Although their perceptions of community are instrumental, many local public officials see a connection between the resolution of a specific policy conflict or the achievement of a particular policy objective and the development of a generalized community capacity. The effectiveness of specific problem-solving processes in the literal community are understood to strengthen the prospects for achieving the possible community.
This consensus process became the model for community decision making from that time forward.... Now there is no way to get a community decision unless you use that technique.

- Robert O'Neal, former city manager, Hampton, Virginia

Sure, no African-American is going to become the mayor of a major American city without the support of the ministers because they unquestionably are the most influential body in the so-called black community. And when they have granted that support, they also expect things to change and rather dramatically. And after all, many of them, upon becoming pastor of a congregation can make dramatic changes by the following Sunday. So they would expect that. In addition, they are going to be influenced by business persons who are a part of that congregation.

- Emmanuel Cleaver, former mayor, Kansas City, Missouri

Even exercises designed to build generalized community capacity, such as visioning processes or strategic planning processes, tend to reduce to specifics – particular issues or defined projects. In sum, then, local public officials are instrumental. This finding indicates that local public officials hold the view that community can only be achieved by “doing community.”

We started a brand new comprehensive plan. It is now in place; it is called the city plan. It was a difficult matter to complete because of the early tensions in the community. Many people in our community are afraid of the fact that the city is growing and is very healthy. They want things to slow down and would prefer to see perhaps fewer people coming to town. That is on one side. Other people, particularly in the business community and for that matter many others, believe the community is a healthy place, a nice place to live with a high quality of life with plenty of opportunity for people to work, therefore, more people are going to want to come and live here.

- Ann Azari, mayor, Fort Collins, Colorado
Conflict brings us together.
- Robert Collins, city manager, Kansas City, Missouri

While deeply instrumental, local public officials see the practical processes of collective problem solving and choice making in distinctively “community” terms. In their descriptions of their day-to-day work, particularly work on the tough issues, mayors and city managers tend to use community ideas and community language – increased levels of participation, building trust between officials and citizens and among citizens, educating one another, willingness to take responsibility, mediation, attempts to achieve consensus. While it is unlikely that many local public officials would describe their primary work as community-building, we found many of the most critical elements of the community-building paradigm in their descriptions of how their jurisdictions dealt with tough issues.

You have to know what the issues are and you have to try to provide a climate that lets those issues work themselves out in a positive, not a destructive, fashion. A manager now has to bring the same skills to every issue. You have to be finely attuned to what issues deeply impact the community and to how deeply they are felt. You must sense where you can try to build a consensus. The issues were always there in the past, but they are much more complex now.
- Tom Downs, former district manager, Washington, D.C.

The chief executive officer of the community has the responsibility to take that leadership, within the constraints of the political system, and try to build a better community. That is one of the fundamental shifts in the manager’s position.
- John Fischbach, city manager, Lake Forest, Illinois

Yes, I am a good listener. I had met with the bar people earlier. I met with the people on the committee on preventing problems with alcohol. I told them directly that I thought their proposal
would not work, that what we needed to do was bring people together to talk. I have a good relationship with the bar owners and believe they trust me. We brought the police and fire departments in, and we had meetings to work out a solution. If there is a problem in the city, I find usually people will come and talk to me about it. They know I will listen.

- Harriet Miller, mayor, Santa Barbara, California

Section IV. Defining and Naming Issues

It is contentious issues that cause communities to turn to institutions and institutions to turn to communities for solutions. Possible changes in the physical infrastructure – a new loop highway, locating a “superfund” site, rezoning a historic district for development, locating HUD subsidized apartments, locating a landfill, locating a fire station – are foremost among the difficult-to-resolve issues. These are issues of the community as a physical place. These issues all signify change, the threat of the unknown, and competing community preferences. Such contentious issues are also clashes between the preferences of the groups in the literal community and differing ideas regarding the character of the possible community.

Local public officials describe such issues in these terms:

So this particular neighborhood group became very well organized and was able to get the attention of the press and the media and really took that approach from the beginning. I had to put my personal feelings aside because, quite honestly, I did not respect a lot of the things that were happening in the neighborhood group. In retrospect, I think a more experienced mayor, maybe, would have never put this on the agenda to begin with. I know I would not willingly do it again. I think I would just take the position that, I'm sorry, this is a process that we have been through. These developers have already received their approval from the city and we have to stand behind that approval.

- Karen Messerli, mayor, Lee's Summit, Missouri
A couple of years ago, the council in Salinas established a very specific policy that they wanted to advocate permanent, owner-occupied farmworker housing. It has become a location issue. Interestingly enough, it’s not in our particular circumstance an ethnic or race issue. It seems to be almost 90 percent economic with the folks concerned about declining economic circumstances. The negative reaction is multiethnic, from a very mixed group including Anglos, Latin Americans, Mexican-Americans, and Filipino residents from the neighborhood. The neighborhood primarily fears that property values would decline.

- David Mora, city manager, Salinas, California

In these statements, local officials describe the issue in the language of projects, in the language of progress, and in the language of success.

As they characterize the positions of community groups on these issues, local officials describe or name these positions as preferences, as established interests, as resistance to change, as self-interest. Here is an example:

More recently, we recognize that it is not the infrastructure; it is really the citizens. It is your neighborhoods. And the neighborhood associations really brought it to our attention. They’ve always been there; they have just never been organized, and I think that we never really listened. But we are now dealing with the second problem, the people. Yes, I do think they expect more of us, but not any more than they really had in the past but now that they can see us perform, they have raised expectations.

- Ray Riley, city manager, Beaumont, Texas

Communities of place tend to be characterized or named by public officials in shorthand – the old-timers, the newcomers, the property owners, the renters, the downtown interests, the Chamber.

In order to resolve place issues, local public officials tend to shift the deliberation from the preferences of groups in the literal community to a consideration of the possible community. The
numbers of participants are expanded. The deliberations are a mixture of stated community group preferences, primarily preferences for the status quo, and competing depictions of the possible community. In this approach the “community” gets bigger, dialogue expands, projects slow down, and the iterative processes of compromise and consensus take over.

We increased the number of board members from 15 to 30 as we began engaging the community. We began with about 1,200 citizens. We met with groups comprised of 12 to 20 folks. We went out into their churches, schools, neighborhoods, retirement homes. We said, “What is it that you value about this community?” And then we asked, “What should we be doing about solid waste?”

- Bill Buchanan, county manager, Sedgewick County [Wichita], Kansas

Open forums are another common approach. Bob Collins, city manager of Kansas City, Missouri, described himself as “a facilitator between all interested parties. My role was to assure that we are meeting fair housing requirements.”

It is not unusual for proposed changes in the physical infrastructure, the community as place, to be reflected in divisions among elected officials. Gary Ortiz, city manager of Leavenworth, Kansas, describes how he deals with divisions among elected officials:

I try to facilitate a more articulate and principled dialogue between the city commissioners…. I tried to have a calming effect on them and be a facilitator, an educator. I viewed my role as limited regarding overt public leadership. I have a professional obligation to give the governing body the best advice possible…. I try to help the city commission give voice to the intentions of what I call the better angels of their inclinations because there can be a tendency to be negative.

The mayor of Rochester, Minnesota, sees it similarly:
My role was to educate. To help lead the city in its greater responsibility as a regional center, and to overcome the resistance to subsidize sewer conversion in the township to improve and protect the water quality in this whole area.

- Charles Canfield

Finally, Larry Blick, city manager of Independence, Missouri, describes approaches to accommodating the interests of community groups:

I characterize it as being able to facilitate a conflict by getting the right people together to “work through” it. We provide them with space and with time. We provide the community development director and the house preservation architect latitude and room to maneuver so they can work through the issues.

The second most common issue that causes local government institutions to turn to community and community to turn to institutions has to do with finances. Illustrative issues include conflicts over funding a Boys’ and Girls’ Club, what to do with new revenues, how to pay for union contracts, funding for arts programs that involve controversial art, unfunded state and federal mandates, funding downtown development, tax breaks for newly relocated businesses. Issues of this type involve communities of ideas and beliefs rather than communities of place. One of the more influential communities of ideas would be described as antitax. Another would be described as favoring established businesses, another as favoring economic development, another as favoring neighborhood preservation and no growth, yet another as supporting growth.

Our findings indicate that issues associated with communities of ideas are more difficult to resolve than issues associated with communities of place. Ideas, values, and beliefs tend to be strongly held and hard to compromise. Communities of ideas are perceived by local officials as less civil, less trusting, and less willing to compromise than communities of place. Proponents and opponents tend to come to these issues holding positions
that are not negotiable. For these reasons, our findings indicate, such issues tend to institutional “solutions” rather than institutional-community resolution. Put another way, issues associated with communities of ideas tend to be either won or lost – usually in formal political or administrative arenas – and lead to conclusions justified not on the basis of consensus but on the basis of either the number of votes or calculations of efficiency or costs and benefits. Forums seem less effective. Attempts at broadening issues to find a larger community, a greater good, are less effective.

Here is an illustrative case:

_The mayor was the swing vote, and half the council wanted the deal no matter what it costs and the other half was looking at the dollars and cents and what I termed as what was fair and equitable. The outcome was finally that the mayor felt regional efforts were worth more than the $200,000. So he made the swing vote and we went ahead with the project, and at that point the majority of the council and the community came back together. But it made a division in the council that it has never recovered from, and the two that were most upset about it did not run for re-election over the issue._

- Dan Collins, city manager, Buena Vista, Virginia

Regarding an attempt to defund an arts program because of a play that had gay themes, Gerald Fox, county manager of Mecklenberg County (Charlotte), North Carolina, said:

_There is a lot more emotional connotation to it. When you are dealing with value judgments, especially when they involve moral issues, it is very difficult to present options. It is difficult for options to sway anyone’s mind._

- Dan Collins, city manager, Buena Vista, Virginia

Although consensus on conflicting issues is less common when communities of ideas are involved, it is nevertheless the case that such groups put great value in forums for the expression
of their views and are particularly sensitive if they are not consulted or informed.

The third set of issues that cause institutions to seek out communities and communities to seek out institutions has to do with group relations. The most important of these communities are racial or ethnic – African-American, Hispanic, Asian, Native American. The next most important are communities of economic difference – the poor, the unemployed, the underemployed. The third community is that of age, particularly the elderly. Taken together, these are communities of circumstance.

The overarching issue facing communities of circumstance has to do with fairness, particularly the fairness of institutions. Issues of fairness are especially exacerbated by white flight and by jurisdictional distinctions between cities and suburbs.

This is a brief description of a case faced by Victor Ashe, mayor of Knoxville, Tennessee:

*Four citizens, three who were African-American, died in police custody. That triggered a tremendous outbreak of concern, particularly in the African-American community. We had a great deal of racial unrest, and a lot of calls for a civilian review board to be established. We also had the police department, the rank and file members, not wanting a review board. So we had a very tense situation. I appointed a citizens' group to look at the whole issue of the police department and community relations and how we can best go about improving. It was a ten-member committee. Five white, five black, a good cross-section of the community. They came back and recommended a police advisory review commission. The council refused to create such a commission, so I did it by executive order.*

**Q:** What groups were involved in the case?

**A:** The NAACP, the Urban League, the Fraternal Order of Police, neighborhood groups, you had a citizens' committee for police review.
Q: What was your role in this case?
A: Well, just about everything, actually. As mayor, it comes to your desk if the public thinks something is wrong.

Q: Was your role in this case about the same as it is in other similar matters facing the community?
A: No, I was much more personally involved.

Q: How comfortable are you in that role?
A: I feel confident in being qualified to deal with it. That kind of situation is not something you enjoy, but you sign on for it when you run for this job and you get elected, so you just do it.

Q: Do you think that citizens expect more from the city?
A: They expect our police department to work in a responsible manner that delivers services and makes the neighborhoods safe.

Q: Is that what citizens really want?
A: I think citizens want a safe place in which to raise their families and hold a job. I think that would be true in any city and county in America.

Q: How do you assess the health and effectiveness of the community?
A: Our unemployment is below 4 percent. You are talking to the mayor of a town that just won the National Football College Championship. We have had the women's basketball championship for six occasions and may win the seventh. And we just won a $100 million empowerment zone award from the federal government. So people in this town are on a high right now.

Mayor Ashe is a mayor with a particularly difficult race relations issue on his hands. In this case, one sees a classic pattern: the formation of a citizens' group to assess the situation and recommend a course of action; the interaction of several communities of circumstance and communities of interests; and
the mayor taking a pronounced leadership role. And then, after establishing a police advisory review commission, he observes that his city is doing great.

Some communities of circumstance are self-reliant and nondependent on public institutions – inner-city churches, for example. Others are particularly reliant on public institutions for the amelioration of their public service problems – inadequate schools, poor public transportation, insensitive and sometimes cruel law enforcement, marginal housing, underemployment.

The rhetoric of issues associated with communities of circumstance has mostly to do with fairness and justice. The institutional responses tend to take the following forms: (1) the appointment of study boards or commissions; (2) political campaigns and elections of representatives of communities of circumstance; (3) leadership response to requests or demands; (4) administrative and other institutional officials practicing social equity in the delivery of public services.

Our findings indicate that issues are initially defined and named by public officials in institutional terms – efficiency, equity, revenues, ordinances. Even at the early stages of issues, local public officials, and particularly mayors, see issues in terms of a greater good, a possible community. As issues “mature” and the level of citizen involvement expands, the naming and descriptions of these issues change to the language of community – participation, trust, responsibility, consensus. As issues are resolved (if they are), the descriptions of those resolutions are almost always in terms of having achieved at least some part of a possible community. We asked respondents to give a title to their resolved issue, as if it were a book or a film. Here are some of the titles:

- The Race to Unity
- The Tumult and the Triumph
- Look Before You Milk a Sacred Cow
- Environmental Responsibility: A Wichita Success Story
- War and Peace
- Government Service Is Not an Oxymoron
- Trains, Planes, and Automobiles: The Kent Commuter Rail System
Section V. Public Officials’ Perceptions of Community Groups

As we indicated earlier, the Public-Government Workshop found three types of community groups – communities of place, communities of ideas, and communities of circumstance. The likely involvement or mobilization of these communities depends on the issue. We measured the following aspects of public officials’ perceptions of groups – perceptions of civility, of willingness to compromise, of constructiveness, of trust, and of legitimacy.

Perceptions of Civility. Communities of ideas were perceived as least civil and least likely to become more civil in their interactions with officials and with each other. Communities of circumstance were more civil and somewhat inclined to become more civil as issues mature. Communities of place showed the greatest change from uncivil to much more civil as issues matured. Perhaps most important in these findings were two points: first, mayors and city managers have very similar perceptions of the civility of community groups and, second, both mayors and city managers have very thick skins and a high tolerance for insult, verbal abuse, and allegations. So even in cases that described rather high levels of uncivil behavior, public officials tended to shrug it off and still “perceive” most community groups, most of the time, to be civil.

Perceptions of Willingness to Compromise. In general, all three types of communities are perceived to be less likely to compromise than to be civil. Communities of circumstance are the most willing to compromise and communities of place least willing to compromise. It appears that issues faced by communities of circumstance are perceived by local public officials to be matters that communities of circumstance are unlikely to be able to control or significantly influence in any event. Communities of place are perceived to be dogged and to strongly resist compromise. But in this doggedness, communities of place become more civil. Communities of ideas are perceived to be noisy and sometimes uncivil, but they are more willing to compromise than communities of place.
Perceptions of Constructiveness. All three types of communities are perceived by local public officials to be not very constructive regarding resolving issues. Mayors tend to hold these views somewhat more strongly than city managers. Communities of place are seen as least constructive, followed by communities of ideas and then communities of circumstance. Communities of place, when faced with issues of place, are least willing to compromise and the least constructive, although improving in civility.

Perceptions of Trust. All three types of communities are perceived by local public officials to have little trust in public officials, of public institutions, or of each other. There is little variation in officials’ perceptions of trust between the types of communities. Managers tend to perceive all three types of communities as more trustful than do mayors. It appears, however, that as issues mature, perceptions of trust increase. It is evident that as groups work on issues with each other and with public officials, trust improves.

Perceptions of Legitimacy. Communities of place and of ideas are perceived by public officials to be more legitimate than communities of circumstance. The legitimacy of a community in the eyes of public officials appears to have less to do with willingness to compromise and more to do with perceptions of civility, constructiveness, and trust. Put another way, communities of place may be difficult to work with but their interests are perceived to be legitimate, whereas the interests of communities of ideas and circumstance are judged to be less legitimate.

The most important finding associated with the perceptions of public officials of different types of communities involved in issues has little to do with the nuances of legitimacy, constructiveness, and willingness to compromise. The bigger finding is that public officials’ perceptions of civility, willingness to compromise, constructiveness, trust, and legitimacy have more to do with problem resolution than do factors of efficiency, costs and benefits, or political or managerial authority. It is, therefore, factors of community more than institutional factors that resolve issues. Public officials appear to know that when it comes to problem solving, community concepts get results.
Section VI. Community and the Roles of Public Officials

How mayors and city managers see the community is the key determinant of the roles they play in community development. Mayors were earlier described as seeing community groups as constituents and voters, while city managers were described as seeing them as interest groups. We found that both mayors and city managers see groups as literal communities. Both mayors and managers have well-developed concepts of a greater good or a broadly based public interest, what we describe as their concepts of possible communities. Mayors use political language, while managers use administrative language to describe their conceptions of possible communities. We now turn to a description of the specific roles played by mayors and city managers.

A. The Problem Solvers

The overwhelming majority of public officials studied in this research described their primary role as problem solver or their work as problem solving. Public officials see the literal community in deeply instrumental ways. Their problem-solving work is almost always applied, practical, and policy specific.

Among mayors, this instrumental view tends to be particularly institutional. Ingrid Sheldon, mayor of Ann Arbor, Michigan, faced a divided community on the matter of locating low-cost and public housing:

At the council level, the different parties got involved and a resolution was passed to try to mandate a mediation. We had just gone to this mediation center in town, so committees were proposed and they met. I think it was almost a one-year process before they finally came to a final resolution of a plan that was blessed at that level then brought to council, and at that point the council, or a majority of the council, was willing to support mediation. In the meantime, more than a year has passed by, and we have big issues in terms of affordable housing in Ann Arbor, and a year of carrying cost on the projects just makes it
that much less affordable.
- Ingrid Sheldon

This is a deeply institutional response to a difficult problem. A response that “solved” the problem but did little to build community. Among mayors, this approach to “seeing” and to doing their work was most common.

Jim White, the mayor of Kent, Washington, dealt with locating a commuter rail terminal in his city:

_This was part of the problem. There was no willingness to try and meet a common ground from the downtown merchants. They wanted a specific site, which they felt would benefit certain businesses. One of the owners of one of the buildings was an old personal friend of mine. I had to tell him that we are not going there. I think one of the trade-offs was partner strategy. The original proposal was to build a large parking lot. Council felt strongly about a parking structure and I supported that. That became a bit of a compromise. As to the location, council was very supportive of what I felt was a reasonable spot. It was not a public battle. I don’t think anyone got hurt because I took most of the heat._

- Jim White

Again, we see the institutional approach to problem solving. City managers tend to use the community paradigm in problem solving more often than mayors. This reflects the modern literature of the profession, which includes concepts such as civic capital, the civil society, and civic infrastructure. We found good evidence among city managers that concepts of community-building are influencing the way they see problems and the way they go about finding solutions to problems.

_I crafted the process for the resolution of the problem. It was setting up the process, not determining the outcome._

- Eric Anderson, city manager, Des Moines, Iowa
... to bring different parties together to achieve a desired outcome.
- Bill Christopher, city manager, Westminster, Colorado

I had a real stake in working with the council to come up with a solution that meets and satisfies a series of objectives – a solution that everyone can live with.
- Robert O’Neal, manager, Fairfax County, Virginia

This is more or less what I do as a mayor; I interact a great deal with the community. It is sort of like gardening, you know. I am out there most of the time, helping to create the environment in which problems can be worked out.
- Ann Azari, mayor, Ft. Collins, Colorado

There are several ways local public officials go about problem solving – as representatives, as facilitators, as manager/expert, or as leader/promoter.

B. The Representatives

The most common role played by many mayors in problem solving is that of representative. This role is found a bit more among mayors in so-called strong-mayor form cities, and in mayors in big cities, regardless of their form of government. The representative role is seen in a general openness to citizen inquiries, complaints, and demands and in an assumption that some form of institutional response is appropriate.

Q: What is your role?
A: Well, just about everything, actually. As mayor, it all comes to your desk if the public thinks something is wrong.
- Victor Ashe, mayor, Knoxville, Tennessee

There is evidence of mayors in their representative role learning to say “no” or suggesting that a particular issue or problem could be better handled by the community. In their representative role mayors tend to be particularly institutional,
using office and authority to attempt institutional responses to citizen preferences and problems. Here is how one mayor learned to strengthen the community by not overpromising.

*I think the expectations are not commensurate with reality. And by that I mean, I am constrained by the laws of the land, just as a white or Latino mayor would be. I can no more direct a contract to a black business than a white mayor could to a white business. But people believe that, because they don’t have a functional knowledge of the government. I think we are better off because I think a whole community of people now understands government better and will not operate with such inflated expectations. And it also has helped the Chamber’s constituency to recognize that a mayor is a mayor. And hopefully, that translates into the bigger point that humans are humans.*

- Emmanuel Cleaver, former mayor, Kansas City, Missouri

Mayors in their representative role do tend to think and talk in terms of the whole people; sometimes they are describing constituents in a polity, but sometimes they are describing either the literal communities they recognize or the possible community they imagine. In our studies, mayors were dealing with real issues and describing their roles in “working through” those issues. In their representative roles, mayors quite clearly navigate their way through the views and preferences of the literal communities they represent in an often noisy and bumpy ride, but usually in the direction of their conceptions of the possible community.

In their representative role, some mayors emphasize communities of circumstance and communities of place when minorities tend to live in particular parts of the city. In this form of representation, the mayor is the champion of those who are economically disadvantaged.

*To constantly serve as a healer, constantly bringing people to the table who have never been in the room, let alone at the table. And so what we’ve been able to do is to bring labor, minorities, clergy, and business leaders to the table and this is the first time in*
the history of the city that all of those people have been at the table.

- Emmanuel Cleaver, former mayor, Kansas City, Missouri

In some circles, representativeness might be thought to be exclusively associated with elected officials in the institutions of democratic government. Not so. There is another powerful form of representation found in democratic institutions – the bureaucracy. In these cases, we found much evidence of city managers playing representative roles. Ordinarily, city managers played the representative role not played in the language of politics or representation but in the language of administration.

Well, I think my role was to point out perspectives for the commission to think about in considering whether to take action. Once they had made the decision to proceed, my job was to try and develop the best case possible that this was the correct thing to do. That it was a reasonable use of taxpayers’ money and that it had a pretty good chance of success for making a positive return to the local economy. I perceived my role to represent the case, that this is a thing that should be done by our county without jeopardizing or seriously damaging the relationship that had been built up over a number of years. So that is what I really tried to do.

- Curtis Freeland, city manager, Arkansas City, Kansas

There is little doubt that many city managers include among their role concepts a sense of representativeness, particularly representativeness of the whole people. We also know from the general research literature on the behavior of city managers that they are often required to say “no” to citizens and that they increasingly suggest, encourage, or even demonstrate ways to develop community responses to some citizen issues. We also have good evidence of city managers (usually working with mayors and city council members) developing institutional-community partnerships or systems of coproduction.
Reform should allow citizens to be fully engaged in the processes of local governance. I anticipate that neighborhood councils will increasingly take over many of the responsibilities of city councils and administrators for setting priorities and evaluating service delivery.

- Charles Church, city manager, Lynchburg, Virginia

I think what is of interest here is trying to define the proper role and mix of public-private partnership. You are trying to use public incentives and major public support, whether it be from state or local government or a corporation that is going to make substantial profit. It raises all kinds of questions about the use of those incentives relative to the private gain, how does that balance, so the community does not feel like they are being ripped off. In this case, (the joint building of a NASCAR track) it is much more situated because of the magnitude of public and private investment.

- Dennis Hays, administrator, The Unified Government of Wyandotte County and Kansas City, Kansas

... we interface with different parts of the community, the religious community, the educational community, the business community, the nonprofit community, and I think we are in a unique position to truly see the big picture. We see how all of these communities connect, and not many people are afforded that opportunity.

- David Watkins, administrator, Lenexa, Kansas

I don't want any enemies. We've been there, we've done that. We've had enemies, we don't want to do that. You don't accomplish anything. We're all going to live there. The university is not leaving, the city is not leaving. We're going to be there, so let's find a way to do this in a positive fashion.

- Harold Godwin, mayor, Newark, Delaware
C. The Facilitators

City managers most often describe themselves as facilitators. Because it is neutral and nonpolitical, the facilitator role fits comfortably with the norms and traditions of professional public administration. City manager facilitation takes many forms. It appears that the facilitator role has primarily to do with communication, deliberation, and dialogue. It almost always involves what could be loosely described as education, education on the technical aspects of issues and education on the views and preferences of citizens and groups. Facilitation almost always involves forums. Facilitation is often lateral and absent assumptions of hierarchy and office. Facilitation is often slow and a bit untidy. Patterns of mediation and consensus often emerge from facilitation. In sum, the facilitation role of city managers is very much in the community paradigm.

I think it is common. But not very comfortable. I think it is one that managers have to do to facilitate to try and bring diverse interests together for the greater good. To balance not only the business interests, that the coffers are not dried up by unfunded mandates, but also to make sure the community does not have a large wedge built into it between large factions. So I guess I am fairly comfortable with this position but it is frustrating though, especially when the players have shown themselves in some instances to not be very trustworthy.

- Hannes Zacharias, city manager, Hays, Kansas

Well, I think the role is whether you are prepared to interject yourself into a process that probably historically has been either the appointed boards or the elected boards, and it's been their role to sort of adjudicate these community values at the base, and the staff's historic role has been to give the best set of technical alternatives and give the best technical recommendations that you can do. I don't think that is sufficient; it's not sufficient anymore just to say "well, this is the best technical solution." I think that increasingly the city manager or the county manager will have to
play a role in trying to not only worry about the technical quality of the recommendations but the process that is going to lead to the answer that the community has the most support for.

- Bob O’Neal, manager, Fairfax County, Virginia

Some mayors play a facilitator role. That role is, however, often associated with mediation between the formal institutions of the city, and particularly members of the city council, and community groups. The advantage of this form of facilitation has to do with the potential for bringing closure to issues, because the formal authority of the city is present. The disadvantage of this form of facilitation is the vertical and hierarchical arrangement of participants. Some mayors, however, function very much like city managers when it comes to facilitation, shifting easily into the community paradigm.

Well, I've become the mediator, and hopefully offer some leadership. I think it should be my responsibility to see that, first of all, interests of the townspeople are served, because they elected me and they pay me and it's their government that I am supposed to be mayoring. So, I feel beholden to them.

- Harold Godwin, mayor, Newark, Delaware

D. The Manager/Expert

To some city managers the role of manager/expert is the most comfortable. In this role, they see issues from an institutional perspective, as if problems in the community are going on in places distinct from the city as an institution. Managers playing this role tend to hold the view that managing the internal workings of the city is their primary responsibility. When they are faced with community issues, they tend to use assumptions of rational decision theory – that data and the expert analysis of alternatives will be persuasive and lead to the reconciliation of issues.

It is sometimes the case that city managers playing the manager/expert role describe this role as “educator.” It appears,
however, that this education is primarily for the purpose of acquainting participants with data or expert opinions.

The manager/expert role is most often found in smaller suburban cities with particularly homogenous demographics and fewer social and economic problems.

The differences that are found between city managers playing the facilitator role and city managers playing the manager/expert role reflect the contemporary professional literature in city management. Although it is a considerable simplification, the general thrust of this literature is toward the increased responsibilities of city managers as experts and as facilitators of the expression of community groups and interests and the development of community capacity.6 In our research, we find considerable evidence of city managers playing the facilitator role. We can only assume that they are also effective institutional managers.

*I have always felt during my entire career as a city manager, that once you are selected and serve in that capacity, that you are there to serve the community as well as the elected officials and sometimes that is difficult to deal with.*

- Gene Miller, city manager, Ormond Beach, Florida

E. The Leader/Promoter

Several mayors and a few city managers play strong leader roles, particularly as the leaders of economic development. There are three reliable political factors associated with the leader/promotion role – jobs, the city property and sales tax base, and civic pride. New projects such as highways, train station restorations, and athletic stadiums often accompany public officials who play leader/promoter roles. It is also often the case that such projects involve all three types of communities. Communities of place sometimes resist projects because of the threat of being relocated or subjected to increased traffic. Communities of circumstance are concerned about the fairness of tax breaks often associated with new projects. Some communities of ideas favor the status quo while others favor the
appeal of jobs, improved transportation, and civic pride. Public officials in leader/promoter roles often live in a noisy, unpredictable, and untidy world of clashing community interests. For such projects to succeed, either more political power is necessary or considerable skill at community reconciliation is necessary. Leader/promoter officials can be frustrated if communities succeed in holding up or stopping a project.

_The leadership part, I think, comes in trying to be innovative with new ideas, to do things that haven't been tried; having some vision as to how we might solve some of these problems._

- Harold Godwin, mayor, Newark, Delaware

A few city managers are willing to play open leader/promoter roles, although it is unusual. In the professional canons of city management, policy (not political) leadership is acceptable, even desirable, so long as it is quiet and subtle. When city managers are in their accustomed facilitator role attempting community support for an idea favored by the mayor and the city council, it is not unusual for the manager to gently shift into an advocacy role.

We encountered at least one example of “the moral dilemma of role reversal,” as it is known in the professional field of city management. In this case, a city manager understood that the elected officials of the jurisdiction were either unwilling or unable to lead in a particular project, although they agreed that the project was desirable. So the manager understood that unless he exercised open and overt leadership on this project it would likely fail.

The newly established city-county consolidation, The Unified Government of Wyandotte County and Kansas City, Kansas, is, through a public-private partnership, building a 75,000 seat NASCAR track including more than $90 million of public (state and local) financing. At a crucial point in the project’s evolution, the most credible representative of the Unified Government was its administrator, Dennis Hays. He called meetings, organized forums, represented the Unified Government at state hearings,
and the like. In short, he became the lead on this project. An independent evaluation of the case indicates that without his leadership, the probability of the project’s success was much lower. Hays says of this leadership:

Because of the significance of this project, the role of the professional administrator was shifted from someone who was behind the scenes, to the one out in front and in charge. It was very uncomfortable to leave the very normal arena of being behind the scenes and low profile, to being out front. The public’s general responsiveness has been very strong throughout the community. And there seems to be an overwhelming level of support except for those folks who have a narrow very special interest because they are getting thrown out of their homes. Two things have happened. One, there have been high expectations for the new form of government and two, they do have high expectations about what benefits will result from the race track once it is up and constructed. The community is struggling. The community for the past 20 years has been in the shadow of growth and development that has occurred elsewhere in the metropolitan area, the Kansas City area and, therefore, the problem we are facing is one of self-esteem, self-image.

Section VII. Conclusions: How Local Public Officials See the Community, Solve Problems, and Do Community Work

In this research, the Community Studies Workshop at the University of Kansas used a case-based, grounded methodology to study two things: how local public officials see and relate to the community in actual practice; how they solve problems and how they view the community while solving problems.

As mayors and city managers work on big problems and issues, they engage in problem-solving practices that move them well beyond their institutional base into the world of communities. In most cases of community problem solving, we find local public officials deeply involved in the community and usually in
positions of leadership. When public officials are engaged in problem solving, both the community and the institutional paradigms are essential. Our findings affirm our starting contention that when there are enlightened city officials, “the city frames, sustains, and encourages the community while community is the primary connection between the citizens and the city.”

In their problem-solving work, we find that local public officials see three distinct kinds of literal communities – communities of place, communities of ideas, and communities of circumstance. Perceptions of the civility, willingness to compromise, trust, and legitimacy of these three types of communities are contingent on the nature of the problem, the “maturity” of community involvement in looking for solutions, the naming of the problem by officials and by communities, and the creativity of leaders in crafting agreeable names and agreeable solutions.

Public officials almost always describe a possible community, a preferred outcome, or a problem solved. How public officials get to the possible community from the complexity of the literal community differs, depending on whether they are in the institutional or the community paradigm. In the institutional paradigm problems do get solved, but there is little evidence of a longer-range building of community capacity as a result. We more often found problem-solving techniques and concepts found in the community paradigm – discourse, forums, participation, responsibility taking, education, trust, consensus-building, time. Local public institutions are seldom able to solve big problems absent extensive community involvement. To solve big problems, public officials leave their institutional homes and get into the community and “do community.”

Public officials play different problem-solving roles. Mayors often play an institution representative or leadership role. Managers usually play a facilitator role or a manager/expert role and often approach problems as opportunities for developing community capacity. These roles are, however, all variations on the primary problem-solving role.
Implications

One interpretation of our findings would be that the often-described “disconnect” between our public institutions and the community is overdrawn. At the local level of government, on big nonroutine matters searching for solutions, we find a considerable “connect” between the leaders of formal public institutions and the community. We also often find this connection in many cases to be community-building in character, enhancing civic capital. If interviewed regarding their opinions of and work with community groups, absent the discussion of a specific problem, local public officials probably do not, as The Harwood Group found, see the need for a fundamentally different type of relationship with citizens. But, in the context of specific problem solving, public officials generally appear to develop, at least for the duration of the problem and its solution, a positive and community-strengthening relationship with community groups.

Our research picked up what many others have observed: that there are many kinds of communities, and that communities are dynamic and episodic. The different kinds of communities we found are generally understood by local officials. The perceptions of different community groups and effective interactions with them are generally well developed. There is the possibility that local officials “need” community groups for the solution of big problems. It is possible, therefore, that officials are more responsive to community groups when they are most needed and less responsive in routine matters.

Our finding that most public officials hold concepts of a greater good or a public interest and that these concepts constitute preferred states, or “possible communities” will probably not satisfy community purists. Mayors and city managers in their problem-solving work, clearly seek to solve problems in the direction of some understood and openly articulated conception of a better city, a stronger city, or a fairer city. We choose to call these conceptions of the better city by public officials the “possible community.” Civil society specialists and advocates probably hold a more natural or organic conception of community and may regard this description of the possible community to be rather minimal. We believe the concept of the
possible community comes close to describing how local government officials see community.

When such problem solving is effectively done it is often the case that key features of the community paradigm are literally used. Our findings, then, could be interpreted to argue that at its best, the problem-solving work of public officials is in the direction of both a better city and a stronger community. These possible communities are the most likely positive outcomes of the interactions between public institutions and communities in effective patterns of problem solving. And we believe that there is evidence of improved civic capital flowing from this problem solving.

Finally, our findings describe communities perceived by local public officials almost always in terms of outcomes, results, consequences. Given their institutional vantage, such a perception of communities is quite rational. It is only a problem that public officials do not tend to see community in abstract terms, or in terms of community independent of public purposes, if community is thought of as its own reward. In the world of public officials communities, too, must work.

These findings closely parallel the concepts of leadership found in the work of Ronald A. Heifetz and Riley M. Sindor. They make an important distinction between authority and leadership, a distinction we found throughout our research. Paradigms of authority are essential if a social system is to remain viable. But, “Systems of authorization are not only formalized arrangements with set positions; they are, in large part, informal arrangements. The office, the formal authorization, is rarely a sufficient source of leverage by itself to provide power. A high officeholder has to gain informal authorization (i.e., respect, trust, fear, bargaining advantages, admiration) if he is to increase his authority, his power to influence. He does so by fulfilling the expectations for which the group informally confers authority.”

Our findings show that the work of problem definition and problem solving is the common thread between the institutions of local government and the generalized functioning of a community. In describing their work and how they go about problem solving, some local officials tend to stay mostly in the
institutional paradigm. But many approach problem solving as community development or simply assume that the work of problem solving is collective and iterative. In doing this, public officials become part of the community.
Endnotes


4 Mathews, *op.cit.*, suggests some of these.


9 Heifetz and Sinder, pp. 191.
Appendix: Methodology

This report is based on a combination of questionnaires and interviews conducted by the Community Studies Workshop at the University of Kansas. Thirty city or county managers and thirty mayors were selected as subjects based on consultation with officials of the International City-County Management Association (ICMA), in the case of city and county managers, and the National League of Cities (NLC), in the case of mayors. Criteria for selection included jurisdiction size (about one-third each from large jurisdictions of more than 400,000 people, one-third from medium-sized jurisdictions of between 100,000 and 300,000 people, and one-third from smaller jurisdictions of fewer than 50,000 people), geographic diversity, longevity (at least 5 years in office), and a reputation for effective leadership.

Selected participants were telephoned to determine their willingness to participate. They were then sent a “Public Official's Case Book” to fill out in advance of the interview. The logic of the case book was to ground the written response and the subsequent interview in actual events, circumstances, or issues. Rather than asking subjects directly what they thought about citizen involvement in city affairs or about the capacity of the city to solve social problems, we asked them to:

Describe an important past or present conflict or controversy in your community, an issue which involved or involves community groups.

The remainder of the case book invited the subject to provide further details and opinions regarding the details of the conflict or controversy.

This approach allowed us to evaluate their views of the public or the community, based on their descriptions of their work, rather than directly asking them their opinions of the community or the public.

At the interview, a trained interviewer tape recorded the official's verbal description of the case described in the case book, followed by the official's responses to a series of follow-up questions:

1. Briefly tell me about the case.
2. What was your role in the case?
3. Was your role in this case about the same as it is in other matters facing the city?
4. How comfortable are you in that role?
5. In this case, were there any trade-offs between efficiency and economy on the one hand, and political responsiveness on the other?

6. Do you think that citizens expect more from the city?

7. What do you think citizens really want?

8. Would you describe your community (not the city government) as healthy and functioning effectively?

9. How do you assess the health and effectiveness of the community?

These interviews were transcribed and, with the completed case books, constitute the data upon which the findings in this report are based.

Three-quarters of the interviews of city and county managers were conducted at the 1998 annual conference of ICMA, and one-quarter were conducted on the telephone. Two-thirds of the interviews of mayors were conducted at the 1998 annual meeting of the NLC, and one-third were conducted over the telephone.

The purpose of these case books and interviews was to determine how public officeholders – elected and appointed – “see” the community. We sought to find out how officeholders “name” public problems and how they feel about individuals and groups involved in those problems. In short, we sought to determine how public officials work, and in doing their work, the extent to which they see that work as institution-building, community-building, or problem solving. Specifically, we sought to contrast public officeholders’ views of the place and role of civil society or community concepts such as civil discourse, trust, responsibility taking, civic learning, participation, and belonging. Cataloging all of these views allowed us to determine the extent to which officeholders see and understand the possibilities of “common work” and their responsibilities for community-building.

There is no question that public officials will choose problems or cases that were favorably resolved or reflect favorably on them or their jurisdictions. As researchers, we are not concerned about this because our objective was to learn how officials see the community and how they describe their work. A public official’s description of how a problem was solved is simply a vehicle for learning how that public official sees his or her jurisdiction, community, and work.
The University of Kansas Community Studies Workshop

The Community Studies Workshop of the University of Kansas is a research team doing studies of local government and particularly the professional administration of local government, community-building and civic capacity, community leadership, and ethics.

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