

Empowerment in Local Government Administration:

The Case of Elgin, Illinois

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Abstract

The role of the citizen, citizen organizations, and local government employees in facilitating participation is described in this case study. The case demonstrates how a local government's failure to achieve its original participation objectives resulted in the recognition of the multi-faceted nature of participation, and how the process of adaptation led to the creation of a on-going process of citizen empowerment.

The creation and continuing existence of the Elgin Community Network is proof that innovation in the government-citizen relationship is not always one of empowering only citizens. In this case, local government personnel were empowered to create a method by which participation may occur. This decision to relinquish control and become adaptive resulted in a lasting forum for participation.

A creative staff committed to the ideal of citizen input into government, a local government willing to give staff the freedom to recognize and develop the complexity inherent in participation, and citizens willing to be engaged in the development of civic capacity of their friends and neighbors were key elements in the case.. The true innovation occurred when the Elgin staff purposively brought these forces together and embraced the complexity of the environment to sustain the empowerment of the citizens of Elgin.

Introduction

Citizen empowerment through enhanced participation in government is an ideal. The many governments in the United States have long stood for the premise that some role in the creation and maintenance of the state is rightfully reserved to the citizen. Defining that role may be difficult, as it can expand to include full participation as an elected official or contract to encompass the most minimal customer oriented reaction to the provision of services. And so rather than define what a citizen should do, we accept what citizens actually do and hope that additional citizens will somehow be entranced into doing more. All too often, this acceptance allows local government administrators to be mere consumers of citizen participation, rather becoming engaged in the process of

participation. It is easy to see, given each party's willingness to accept the path of least resistance, how citizen engagement has slipped away.

Academicians and practitioners seek to understand how government can facilitate participation and bring the fruits of that participation into day to day operations of public organizations. King and Stivers (1998) and Innes and Booher (1999) provide a few of the examples of these efforts. Hundreds of researchers – from Katz and Kahn (1978) to Innes and Booher (2000) – have documented the technical/bureaucratic behavior of public administrators within traditional organizations. It is not surprising, then, that most of the theoretical frameworks developed to capture the knotty problems of bringing together citizens and their government are based on the premise of stable organizational systems in which changes to the environment are managed by experts within the organizational structure. The system already exists; it is reasonable to assume that it will continue to exist in its current form. Change, when it occurs to the system, is most often incremental. Organizations maintain the status quo by structuring inputs to match organizational needs.

This pattern seems to fit many of the negative participation experiences reported by researchers and journalists. Citizens try to get involved, and are met with government employees who view themselves as experts needing only the most basic input. Governments try to bring citizens “into the process of government” only to find that citizens aren't necessarily interested in being part of the process. The frustration created by these situations is only heightened when additional efforts bring the same results. It is not at all surprising that cynicism grows when the desire to give and receive input is completely mismatched among the parties involved.

Our inability to fully comprehend the processes by which organizations and citizens interact to enhance participation may not be related to actual processes by which citizens participate. The literature on citizen involvement relies on a list of ways people participate – attending meetings, participating in focus groups, completing questionnaires, serving on task forces. The assumption with each of these methods is that participation is part of a stable process. The methods are defined, people take part in the activities, and participation has occurred. Participation is an incident; an event rather than a process.

A short term view of practice confirms the perception that participation occurs episodically and the results are highly unpredictable. At times citizens may attend a public meeting and force items on or off the agenda. At other times the same citizens might attend and do nothing. Task forces can be hard to recruit or may become entrenched within the government structure. Adopting a long term view, although difficult, is necessary to understand how citizens can be empowered to want to provide information rather than merely respond to requests for data. Citizen empowerment in local government participation is a process rather than a single event. Central to this understanding is changing the way we look at the organization-citizen interaction. Instead of modeling how participation fits within an organization, a more helpful way of analyzing government-citizen interaction may be to start at a premise of instability. Government, citizens, and other groups must adapt to one another. Looking at the process of participation as a series of adaptive movements should give researchers and

practitioners a basis to understand why some practices are successful and enduring while other efforts fail to achieve their goals.

The Case of Elgin, Illinois

The City of Elgin, Illinois is located 38 miles from Chicago in the Fox River valley. It is an urban suburb, caught in the conundrum seen in many older cities in Illinois – with an established downtown and light industrial sites coupled with development in the outer edges of its city limits, the City faces many different demands from disparate groups. The population has increased rapidly over the past 13 years – from 77,010 in 1990 to 101,432 in 2003 – a 32% increase. U.S. Census data reveal that the population in Illinois rose 8.6% during that same time period. During that time racial diversity has also increased. Individuals identifying themselves as Hispanic rose from 18% to 25% and there was a two percent increase in Black residents. Elgin was ranked 9th among cities in Illinois based on 1990 data; Elgin was ranked 8th among cities in Illinois based on 2000 data. The city is densely populated, with a median income of \$45,822. That matches the median income of the state (\$46,590) but is much lower than the median income figure for the surrounding communities in the Fox River Valley area. The median incomes for those communities range from \$62,540 in West Dundee to \$170,755 in South Barrington to \$67,323 in South Elgin. Two communities within the ten largest in Illinois are in southern Illinois and don't have comparable incomes due to proximity to Chicago. Median incomes for the seven remaining communities range from \$37,667 in Rockford to \$88,771 in Naperville. Elgin falls in the middle of those communities.

The Grand Victoria Casino is anchored at Elgin. The owners of the Grand Victoria set up a foundation that is used to direct 20% of the net profits of the casino to aid Elgin, Kane County, and the State of Illinois in education and social service provision. Non-profit organizations apply to the board of the foundation, which is composed of casino representatives and Elgin community leaders. Elgin receives an annual rent of \$2.2 million from the casino. The City has not allowed this funding to enter any operating budget nor has it stopped grant funding for projects in Elgin. Accordingly, when the profits of the casino fall off, the amounts of the grants from the foundation decrease but the City remains committed to supporting non-profit and citizen run organizations. It is possible to view the foundation's contribution to Elgin as a direct source of funding outside the control of the City, while allowing the City more flexibility in funding projects.

Based on these facts Elgin can be characterized is a community of moderate wealth undergoing rapid population growth and racial and ethnic changes coupled with a unique revenue source that provides funding that the City would most likely not have been able to provide. Elgin government has maintained its autonomy over funding non-profit organizations by not allowing the foundation to supplant all City funded grant activity. All of these facts provide the backdrop of citizen involvement in Elgin. Still, long time and newer residents, established businesses and new commercial developments, existing government structures and the need for responsiveness to the growing community all combine to create stress on existing government structures. The need for some form of adaptation is clear in this environment.

Elgin has faced these challenges for decades. In the 1980's citizens clamored for smaller, less intrusive government. This cry was coupled with distrust in government motivations and actions. In Elgin, these attitudes were voiced by dissatisfied residents by complaining to the City. (Interview, Cherie Murphy) The City Manager and Council became concerned with this pattern of involvement and decided to take steps to change the ways in which residents were engaged with their local government. (Interview, Cherie Murphy) Several individuals proposed the creation of an office that would enhance citizen participation through regular bureaucratic channels. The idea that citizen involvement could be increased by having an office within the Elgin bureaucracy was not received well by the City Council. In the late 1980s the Council rejected a plan that would have created a program to explicitly draw various groups in the community into Elgin's government. (Confidential interview)

During this same time, citizens were organizing on their own. One example is the Gifford Park Association. What began as an effort to check the crime rate and begin to restore historic homes turned into one of the first neighborhood associations in the city. Members of that group recall the early 1980s as a time when Elgin had little money to support neighborhood initiatives and seemed to have little interest in the changes taking place in the neighborhoods. The residents living across from Gifford Park decided to do the work themselves to make sure the work got done. (Building Blocs, 2001) This group of citizens believed there was little reason to expect that someone else would take control of the intricacies of managing a neighborhood and much to gain by taking the initiative themselves.

Non-governmental actors were also becoming active in Elgin. In 1981 Neighborhood Housing Services, a not for profit organization, started providing a link between individuals and lenders to help people get loans to purchase and repair houses in older neighborhoods. NHS is still providing that service in Elgin. NHS has within its organizational structure a neighborhood committee which allows citizen input into how NHS operates. (Neighborhoods get a big boost in Elgin, 2001)

In the 80s and early 90s efforts to improve Elgin focused at the level of the individual home through NHS, and at the neighborhood level by the people involved in the Gifford Park Association. The City failed to respond to the concerns of citizens during this time period, although an organizational response was offered. Two of the three outlets of participation – NHS and the City's proposed program – focused on making citizens fit within existing organizational structures. The actual efforts by citizens to change their neighborhoods were noted by the City and in the mid 1990's renewed attempts to bring citizen voice to government were made by Elgin personnel.

Building a better relationship between residents and the City started with an effort to understand the nature of the existing problems facing both the City and its residents. City Manager Rick Helwig began that analysis by hiring an independent contractor to study existing neighborhood structures operating within Elgin. Cherie Murphy was hired to build a database of the neighborhood groups and begin a discussion with the leaders of those groups to determine whether a city-wide citizen participation initiative was needed. That group of individuals agreed there was, and in the fall of 2000, Cherie Murphy joined the Elgin city government as Neighborhood Liaison. Murphy became the face of the organizational commitment to increasing citizen involvement in Elgin.

The people Murphy brought together also agreed that some structure was necessary. The new organization should build on the strengths of the neighborhoods at the same time it adopted an expansive definition of who belonged within a neighborhood. A neighborhood is more than the people living in the homes in a physical space. The neighborhood includes the businesses, schools, churches, PTA groups – all people who have a tie to that particular area, even if they may not live there. The group also recognized that some rational form of organization of participants was needed. The Elgin Community Network (ECN) was created out of these discussions. The ECN was to be developed by the city and interested citizens (Murphy was named as contact person) but not result in a city organization. The ECN was to be organizationally and financially separate from Elgin government.

In January, 2001 the presence of ECN in Elgin was publicly announced. To set up the structure of the organization, Dave Kaptain, the interim director of the ECN, and the group assembled by Murphy examined other communities around the nation. One particularly appealing idea was that of the umbrella association. In that concept, many different neighborhoods are brought together into a larger, more diverse group. Made up of multiple neighborhood associations, citizen groups, and businesses the umbrella association would serve as a conduit for citizen participation. The umbrella associations would identify a representative to serve on the steering committee of the ECN. By adapting this concept of the umbrella association to the needs of the ECN, Kaptain began the processes of tying together the open concept of neighborhood a structure that immediately involved citizens and would encourage greater citizen participation. He charged a subcommittee to determine how several overarching groups of neighborhoods of the city could be identified. The criteria for this activity were (1) no neighborhoods were to be split and (2) each area must have a link to the downtown area. The resulting map mirrored the variety of maps used by police, fire, planning, and code enforcement. Thus ECN's first accomplishment in citizen input was identifying a rational way of drawing the service areas in Elgin.

By adopting the umbrella strategy, the ECN was better able to capitalize on several of the strengths already found in Elgin. First among these is the existence of distinct neighborhoods within the entire city. Elgin's physical structure is more common to newer suburbs than older cities, which makes identification of geographical ties easier. One example of this is the Griffin Park area, mentioned earlier, which managed to organize an association without the benefit of a developer's start up or association fees. The Griffin Park neighborhood association served as a model for other, older neighborhoods that could not rely on a development based association. The second strength used by ECN was the City's and citizens' experience with Neighborhood Housing Services. NHS had been in existence for almost 20 years, which made the idea of a not-for-profit organization working to better the community a familiar one. The final strength identified at this time was the existence of facilitative support from the City. Cherie Murphy laid the groundwork that allowed the ECN a way to disperse responsibility for participation back to the community. In this way the ECN was tied to the citizens through their direct participation and also through a representative who was elected from all the associations within their area.

The separation between the City and the ECN was emphasized in these early efforts so that the new organization would remain legitimate to residents critical of the Elgin government. An additional tool to show separation was the ECN's fiscal support structure. At no time was ECN a committee of city government, and it never used only government funds to finance its work. The ECN sought and received grant funds from the City of Elgin, the Neighborhood Housing Service, and the Grand Victoria casino, which is located in Elgin. This level of grant activity showed the level of separation from the City. The ECN filed for 501(c)(3) status as not-for-profit organization in the summer of 2002 and marks its official existence as January, 2003.

This background provides a number of insights into the innovativeness of the city's response to the need for citizen participation. First is the absence of a direct threat from the environment. There was no one event that precipitated government involvement in organizing a community group. Second, the process was allowed to unfold. Residents steered the process – Murphy acted as a facilitator of the group. Rather than allowing the city to have a heavy hand in the structure and direction of the ECN, city employees encouraged residents to remain in control. A resident not associated with Elgin government, Dave Kaptain, was named interim director and then executive director at the request of the steering committee. A third element of the development of the ECN that is worth noting is the decision to obtain 501(c)(3) status. This recognition made a clear demarcation between Elgin and the ECN. While the ECN and city staff have worked together on projects, it should be clear to anyone who questions the control of ECN that the two organizations are separate. The question of survival remains: is the ECN an organization destined to succumb to the pressures identified earlier? Will it fail due to lack of interest or be subsumed within the government structure? Ultimately, can an organization created in this fashion sustain the process of citizen involvement so that citizen empowerment can continue? The answers to these questions are found in the ECN's first empowerment endeavor: Popcorn and Planning.

Popcorn and Planning

Elgin's last comprehensive plan was written in 1983. The rate of growth coupled with the hiring of a new director of economic development led to the decision to issue a new comprehensive plan in 2003. This decision was reached in 2000, with plans to incorporate citizens through traditional methods. The first calls for participation were largely unsuccessful, a result expected by several City employees. (Confidential interview) New participation efforts were scheduled for 2002. In 2001, several of the city employees discovered some movies about neighborhood planning. Because the comprehensive plan process had begun, these employees and some members of the ECN started watching the movies, and while watching them, ate popcorn.

The movies focused on a number of different communities across the country, showing the challenges faced and the responses to those challenges. This proactive behavior by city employees became important when the first attempts at generating citizen participation in the comprehensive planning process fell short of the city's expectations. At that point, the individuals who had watched the movies realized that residents might find them informative. This insight worked well with the goal of

educating citizens about the ECN and how Elgin handled growth and management issues.

Working with the ECN, the City scheduled an evening of Popcorn and Planning. The session was advertised on the community bulletin board, through the newsletter, and by posting information in local businesses. These were the traditional ways of alerting residents about city activities. In addition, the ECN advertised the event by alerting the neighborhood associations. The methods of attracting residents and the forum itself showed imagination. Rather than being invited to yet another public meeting, with all the negative connotations of that setting, residents were invited to go to a movie and eat free popcorn! By moving the activity out of government control by having multiple sources of advertising and into a non-traditional setting, the city planners and the ECN attracted people who had not participated in government.

Once the first movie was shown, demand for additional information increased. The organizers continued to use the Popcorn and Planning title and format, but began to add focus groups after the movie. People generated a list of strengths and weaknesses of their neighborhoods on the topic explored in the movie. After that process smaller groups were created, each given the charge of developing the strengths and weaknesses that had been identified during the general session. Once again, the organizers found an innovative way of incorporating resident voice – rather than just showing the movie and sending people on their way, residents were asked to work in the planning process having been educated about the issues they were discussing. In this way, citizens became experts on the subject matter and government actors became experts on citizen concerns. This element of the planning process made it possible to rise above a traditional challenge of citizen participation: organizational resistance to information provided by non-experts (citizens) and citizen resistance to responses made by unengaged administrators.

Shortly after beginning the Popcorn and Planning sessions, employees brought the planning process to the neighborhoods. Tom Anderson (director of Planning), Cherie Murphy (Neighborhood Liaison), and Ruth Ann Hall (assistant to Cherie Murphy), took maps of the city to neighborhood groups and gave them the opportunity to identify how they would like their neighborhoods to improve. By taking the planning process to the meetings of the associations rather than requiring the associations come to the City meetings, residents had a first hand view of how different activities in neighborhoods affected the entire city. Introducing this perspective was a first step to satisfy a long term goal of the ECN – the recognition by residents that Elgin is a community of neighborhoods whose elected and administrative leaders want residents to be involved.

As time passed more people became active and more information was requested. Outside speakers were brought in, and the umbrella associations arranged for meetings with the city employees and a member of the ECN steering committee. This level of involvement encouraged residents to become active in steering City priorities. A survey conducted in 1998 had documented that citizens wanted a bike path that ran throughout Elgin. This became a dominant topic in the umbrella organization meetings with the ECN. The next phase of Popcorn and Planning came directly out of the interest voiced in those meetings – in the late spring of 2003, Popcorn and Pedaling meetings were announced and immediately after the Popcorn and Pedaling series was completed, plans were laid for a summer 2004 Popcorn series to focus on how local government works.

The questions posed earlier about survival, separation, and citizen empowerment can all be answered now: The ECN has survived and flourished, it remains separate from the City, and citizen interest in maintaining the organization continues to grow. Using the experiences of failure (the inability to create a government-run structure to facilitate participation and the absence of participation in the early planning process) Elgin personnel helped create an outside organization that avoided City bureaucracy and citizen perceptions of government control. Both citizens and government employees were empowered by these activities, making Elgin's efforts at inclusion truly innovative.

Planning – and Popcorn – in a Complex System

The case described here is that rare event – a real life case that has the capacity to inform both theory and practice. As is always the case with rare events, our ability to apply the lessons learned to other settings must be raised. Demographic factors would appear to make the case unique, particularly the role of the casino's foundation in funding the non-profit organizations found in Elgin. In addition, the rapid growth and increase in diversity also might distinguish Elgin from communities seeking out greater levels of participation. However, there is no evidence that existence of the foundation influenced the administrative attitude toward greater levels of inclusion; those attitudes arose from the need to respond to organizational and citizen concerns. The creation and subsequent separation of the Elgin Community Network also relied on the changes to the population of the community. Rapid increases in size and racial and ethnic diversity may be an environmental factor which exacerbated the need for an adaptive response by Elgin. Also, it might be argued that this factor accelerated the process of the creation of the organization. At the same time, it is important to note that these increases were coupled with long-standing pressures from within the community. Using only this case it is impossible to distinguish the importance of differences among groups of citizens (e.g. long term v. short term residents, business v. residential property owners) and population change. Finally, the proximity of a major metropolitan area may also be a concern. Again, only through comparative analysis can this factor be assessed. Clearly, replication of the case is necessary to tease out these factors, the relationships among them, and the role of the choice of adaptation in creating an environment of change. The clarity of the case provided by Elgin makes it an excellent starting point from which to begin this process.

The interplay of the three factors of citizen interest, a hospitable environment, and public administrators who can and do work to achieve results in the complex system noted earlier make this case a rich base against which to assess further thoughts about the necessity of each of the three factors in creating future innovative efforts to bring citizens into government on their own terms – to empower citizens to be active participants rather than consumers of public administrative action. As the City employees involved with the development of the ECN and on-going relationships between the ECN and the government of Elgin discovered, the processes of citizen empowerment can lead to the empowerment of government personnel.

Many new questions are found in the simple success of the creation and maintenance of the Elgin Community Network. How do we identify the complex

situation to which a successful response can be given? Is the existence of the three factors necessary? Sufficient? Because complexity arises out the entire environment of organizational action, it seems likely that greater number of actors with different institutional objectives must create greater levels of complexity. Does the absolute amount of complexity preclude the type of adaptive response seen in Elgin or do additional factors become more important?

An innovation in management is seen in this case. The City Manager and the employees of the planning department of the City of Elgin created the environment out of which complexity inevitably flowed. They went out and sought complexity. They consciously made the effort to build the situation in which adaptive behavior would be required in the future. And perhaps most impressive of all, they then made sure they will have no control of the situation they have created.

The innovation in the creation of the Elgin Community Network is actually a series of innovative responses to challenges created out of a desire to enhance citizen participation. After the first step of learning about the neighborhood associations in Elgin was taken, every other step represented a choice to commit to developing participation or to stop and incorporate participation into the government. And at each point, citizens and city management and employees chose to pursue participation. What resulted was the empowerment of every actor and organization who took part in the process.

In this case it is impossible to identify a single point at which the system changed from reflexive to adaptive. The interplay between those seeking to increase resident involvement, organizations designed to accomplish that goal, and the needs of the government create the impression of a flow of activity without any ebb. This may be most important innovation documented here: Government employees and citizens allowed themselves to be empowered. The results of the innovation are concrete – the creation of a non-for-profit organization whose sole function is to enhance citizen participation – and philosophical. Whether this case remains unique or is replicated appears to be a function of the will of the citizen, the hostility of the environment, and the desire and capacity of the public administrator to facilitate change.

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