Civic Organizing in Eau Claire, Wisconsin
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Abstract
An underlying crisis confronting many US communities is the lack of the political will to confront and address their most pressing fiscal, social, and political issues because both the people and their governing institutions have lost the capacities to come together in public deliberation and problem solving. In part this is so because during the 20th century, traditional political, education, and community civic institutions became service-oriented, with work approaches that became increasingly hierarchical, narrow in scope, and expert-defined. Governance and public problem solving became detached from everyday work environments and local sources of knowledge. This resulted in limited and fragmented public roles for professionals, elected officials, and citizens, and the loss of institutional capacity to act. One alternative perspective for addressing this crisis is provided by civic organizing, which is a conceptual organizing framework that integrates active citizenship into everyday environments for the purpose of solving public problems, building public leadership, and developing the broad civic base necessary to govern effectively in a democracy. Civic organizing emphasizes civic training, developing public leadership, and restructuring the institutions, associations, and spaces where people do public work and govern society.

In June 2007 a coalition of local governments, school institutions, and civil society organizations in Eau Claire County, Wisconsin US implemented Clear Vision Eau Claire, an inclusive citizen-based community visioning and strategic planning initiative. The initiative draws on the perspective that democratic politics begins with the conversations citizens have about the public’s interest and about the choices they want to make about the kind of community they want. Drawing on a civic organizing framework, Clear Vision does not replace the formal planning, decision-making, and budgeting processes of local governments, but rather seeks to expand the community’s capacity for effective participatory citizenship and collaborative institutional decision-making by government, business, and civil society.

I. Introduction and Background
The City of Eau Claire (population 67,000) is a regional economic center for a west central area in the State of Wisconsin US. Public services are provided locally by numerous city, county, public school and state agencies in a highly decentralized and fragmented public service delivery system.

Professional administrators, appointed by locally elected boards, serve as the chief executive officers for each of the local government jurisdictions. Public meetings of elected boards and councils require a prior public notice. Government budget and operational information are public information and are readily accessible to the media and members of the general public.

In Eau Claire, 90% of adults having at least a high school educations, and 38% having 2 or more years of post-secondary education. The population is approximately 93% white, with the community’s 2500 Hmong income residents being the largest ethnic minority. Median household is $36,399 compared to the Wisconsin median household income of $43,791. Approximately 57% of the City’s households own their own homes. Despite the loss of a number of traditional manufacturing industries over the past 30 years, the community’s work force retains a strong unionized labor perspective.

The Eau Claire community has a high level of participation in volunteer service and community organizations. There are more than 200 civil society organizations (CSO), including community service, social service, union, youth, senior, and ethnic associations, plus an additional 100+ faith based groups in the City of Eau Claire alone. However, with the exception of residential neighborhood associations, most
such community organizations view themselves as apolitical actors within the broader community, with no perceived active role in community governance. The concept of ‘civil society organizations’ and the potential role of CSOs within community governance are not generally acknowledged.

II. Description of the Initiative

The **Clear Vision** initiative was triggered by a shared concern by local government about how the greater Eau Claire community (including all of Eau Claire County population 96,000) could afford to fund $400 million in future community facilities needs for schools, performing arts, courthouses and jail, sewer plant, parks, and community centers. The decentralized and fragmented political and community decision-making process had long inhibited both intergovernmental collaboration and effective civic participation. High local property taxes and declining public services has been accompanied by rising frustration and disengagement by citizens in the political process. Voter turnout in local elections has declined from 36% of eligible voters in 1987 to 23% in 2008.

In March 2007 the city and county administrators convened an informal meeting of key government and civil society organization leaders to discuss mutual community facilities issues. At the meeting, a senior project facilitator with the National Civic League, a national CSO promoting local government reform and civic engagement, presented a proposal for initiating a community visioning and strategic planning process for the greater Eau Claire community, which would include all of Eau Claire County. The initial ad hoc group agreed that an inclusive, citizen-based problem solving approach was essential and worked to secure $40,000 in joint funding for the first year planning phase of the initiative. Within 3 months, commitments were secured, with 1/3 funding from the City of Eau Claire, 1/3 funding from Eau Claire County, and 1/3 from a variety of other organizations including the Eau Claire School District, local university, local technical college, local Community Foundation, United Way, and Chamber of Commerce. Formal planning for the visioning initiative, tabbed “**Clear Vision Eau Claire**” began in June 2007.

The initial **Clear Vision** objectives were to use a citizen-focused participatory process to:
- Increase the level of citizen participation in community problem-solving
- Reverse the sense of disconnectedness commonly voiced by individual citizens
- Build a community consensus for setting priorities to address community facilities needs
- Articulate a compelling written vision for the greater Eau Claire community

The **Clear Vision** planning process is coordinated through two citizen co-chairs, a citizen coordinating committee, and a community stakeholder committee. An experienced National Civic League facilitator conducts the monthly stakeholder meetings, and serves as a project resource for the co-chairs and coordinating committee. A diverse stakeholder committee of 150 citizens serves as the focal point for identifying and addressing substantive community issues and strategies.

The initial planning phase included 10 community stakeholder meetings held at a local church. Meetings began in October 2007 and will conclude in May 2008. The stakeholder meetings are open to the public and anyone can participate in the meetings. At the same time a defined stakeholder committee provides a consistent core of planning participants. The stakeholder committee was recruited to reflect the ethnic, geographic, age, gender, and occupational diversity of the community. The mix of stakeholders includes members of local not-for-profit community organizations, including faith based groups; environmental and housing activists; health care provider; business groups; neighborhood associations; students; retirees; and a limited number of government professional staff and elected officials. Many stakeholders are not affiliated with any formal organization, but are participating as individual citizens interested in community issues.
Phase One of the initiative will conclude in June 2008 with a community report and strategic action plan (written by the stakeholders) identifying priorities in 6 key community performance areas: community collaboration/partnerships, education, health care, transportation, quality of life, and economic development. The purpose is to identify and implement “trend-benders”-strategic actions that will dramatically alter the rate and direction of community change and performance over the next 10 to 15 years.

Key Clear Vision organizing strategies include:

- Reframing the central community problem to be how to overcome fragmented decision-making and come together as a broader community to resolve pressing community issue.
- Recruiting a highly diverse group of participants and limiting the number of government participants.
- Structuring the process to be citizen-led, not directly responsible to any government agency, with administrative and fiscal oversight provided by the Community Foundation.
- Using a Civic Index Survey as a basic training strategy to assess citizen perspectives on collaboration and participation, and illustrate essential civic infrastructure assets.
- Integrating large group and small group facilitation techniques to expand individual opportunities to speak and participate.
- Providing detailed process worksheet handouts to guide key performance area work groups and insure consistency and coordination citizen work groups.

Key results thus far include:

- Securing joint funding from a coalition of government, business, and CSO organizations for a community project
- Recruiting a highly diverse group of citizen participants, including many who had never participated in public policy discussions.
- Creating the first public space in the community where citizens worked as co-creators with elected officials and government officials to identify and address public policy issues.
- Strengthening the public leadership connections across institutional and political boundaries.

III. Analytical Section

Lack of political will. The lack of political will in Eau Claire to address community problems has been the result of: (1) fragmented political and institutional decision-making; (2) loss of public problem-solving skills and capacities of citizens; and (3) lack of public space opportunities where effective public problem-solving can occur. Local governments in the greater Eau Claire community have been unable to build any broad community consensus for setting priorities and funding critical public and community facilities. Formal decision-making among the existing local government organizations is fragmented. Local governments in Eau Claire function within separate decision-making and operational silos, with limited budget and capital program collaboration. There is also limited communication and program coordination among local civil society organizations, which compete for declining financial resources and are disengaged from community governance issues and processes.

Underlying the fragmentation of formal structures is a paradigm of formal citizenship, pervasive throughout not only Eau Claire, but much of the US, that sees politics as only something elected politicians do, and therefore limited to the few. Accompanying this limited definition of politics is an equally limiting role for citizens-be informed, write letters, vote, and pay taxes. It is not surprising that many citizens lack the civic organizing skills to participate effectively in public problem solving, nor that the formal democratic structures-city, county, and school district government-tend to limit opportunities for citizen participation to those consistent with the dominant, but limited view of citizenship. Consequently, most citizen participation has traditionally been limited to testifying at public hearings or serving on formal advisory committees that report to the governing bodies. Voter turnout for local
elections is low and declining, and local governments sometimes struggle to recruit citizens to serve on citizen advisory boards such as the plan commission, housing board, or waterways commission.

While inhibiting responsive public decision-making, the decentralized political structures and fragmented community governance did not pose a major challenge to implementing the Clear Vision initiative. The lack of any demonstrated effort by the formal institutions to provide a comprehensive response to community problems created a vacuum easily filled by the Clear Vision proposal. In addition, basing the project on shared funding not only limited the initial financial exposure of any individual government, but also diffused the customary reluctance and caution of bureaucratic organizations to try something different.

The greater challenge to the Clear Vision initiative came from the limited view of politics and citizenship held initially by many of the participants. Many participants, including those on the project leadership committees, had a conditioned response to rely on elected officials or professional staff for both problem definition and problem solutions. Many participants were unfamiliar with participatory group processes. Many had only a cursory understanding of the structures or responsibilities of the different local government organizations. Few had had any experience, in a public setting, of analyzing and mapping community dynamics and power relationships. Most participants struggled to some degree in understanding and acting on the concept of citizens as active participants and co-creators in public problem solving.

Public problem solving in a democracy means people meeting and talking in large groups and small groups, struggling to listen to others, being fair and respectful while disagreeing about matters of personal significance, and having more questions than answers. Public problem solving is group process and it is messy work, and it can be emotionally frustrating for all participants, especially for those unaccustomed to being held accountable by their peers for what they say.

Strategies for building political will. The Clear Vision initiative was based explicitly on a participatory model of citizenship. The participatory model, which re-emerged in the US in the 1980’s promotes collaborative problem-solving, redefines problems from diverse views, promotes public dialogue, restructures mediating institutions (governments, schools, community organizations), and defines citizens as primary actors in effective public problem-solving. From the outset, the focus of Clear Vision initiative was to expand the level of civic collaboration among government, private sector, and civil society organizations by conducting a citizen focused community problem solving process. The intent was to do this by creating a public space for citizen participation, recruiting a highly diverse group of citizens reflecting multiple perspectives about community, and designing a participatory group process for public problem-solving.

At the initial March meeting, the city and county administrators reframed the central community problem as how the broader community could work together to set community priorities, and then work together to achieve them. The definition of the shared problem was then followed with specific proposal to create a public space for joint public problem solving by implementing a community visioning and strategic planning initiative.

Key to the community visioning proposal moving forward was the early and enthusiastic support of three key civil society organizations: the Chamber of Commerce, the United Way, and the Eau Claire Community Foundation, a local philanthropic organization. The Community Foundation offered to provide fiscal and administrative oversight of the project contract with the National Civic League, thus providing a home for the project independent of the government organizations. The early support of three key civil society organizations in turn facilitated the efforts of the local government leaders to secure approval of project funding from each of the governing bodies. Formal approval of mid-year funding for a
new community initiative then became easier to secure from the elected councils since the amount being requested was small and was matched by contributions and support from other key community organizations.

Successful initiative. Although only 2/3 of the way through the first year, the Clear Vision initiative has been successful in providing a unique public space for citizen problem-solving, recruiting a diverse group of participants, and establishing that expanded civic engagement and community collaboration will be essential components for community governance. Participants have established civic engagement and community collaboration (identified as the “Partnerships for Change”) as one of 6 key performance areas to addressed in the final report, and that participatory citizenship processes will be key to implementing the action plans being developed for the other priority areas in health, education, transportation, quality of life, and economic development.

The stakeholder meetings have also provided the opportunity for building and strengthening the informal relationships among leaders of local government, business, civil society organizations, including many faith based organizations. Many beneficial conversations between local government officials never take place because there is no public space where they can occur. The monthly stakeholder meetings have provided that public space.

For the participants, the Clear Vision process has successfully modeled how a participatory process can work. Most participants now speak in terms of what they can do to address community issues, rather than what government can do for them. Four of the participants became first time candidates for local elected office, with three of them being elected in April 2007.

Perhaps, most significant from a community governance perspective, the local Community Foundation is pursuing a formal expansion of its organizational mission to include capacity building for civic engagement and community leadership. The Foundation is well situated, given its core mission and its fiscal and philosophical connections with NGO’s such as the Ford Foundation to play a much more explicit and intentional role as a key civil society organization in strengthening participatory processes in both government and other non-profit (civil society) organizations.

On a scale of 1 to 10, the initiative has been an 8 in its success in building the capacity and resolve of the participants to expand the active and participatory role of citizens in formal governance processes. The first initiative of the two Clear Vision stakeholders noted above that were elected to the County Board was to expand the public comment opportunities for citizens at full board meetings. Citizen participation and civic collaboration are now front burner issues for all local governments, as well as the broader community decision-making process.

Factors of success and key lessons learned. Key factors contributing to the success of the Clear Vision initiative include:

- General recognition and acknowledgment by local government, media, and the general public that government and community decision-making processes were not addressing pressing community problems;
- Acknowledgement by local government officials of the political reality that the continued pattern of sharply declining state revenue support would require public referenda to maintain critical public services
- Perception within city, county, and school district governments that citizens were frustrated with limited opportunities for public input and comment
- Recent history of increased intergovernmental cooperation between the City and County government administrators to expand opportunities for sharing delivery of public services;
A decentralized and fragmented local decision-making process that left a political vacuum that could be filled by a collaborative proposal such as Clear Vision.

Key lessons learned include:
1. **The power of convening.** Convening a meeting is a powerful organizing tool and anyone can do it. It is difficult for any political or community leader to refuse a genuine invitation to attend a meeting to discuss community issues and matters of common concern.
2. **Begin civic organizing with existing organizations.** Look first to existing organizations for potential support in conducting community initiatives. In Eau Claire, the Chamber of Commerce, United Way, and Community Foundation organizations were well established, had extensive community networks, and immediate credibility. Although none were specifically focused on creating political will for participatory governance, all shared a common mission in improving the community.
3. **Change the system design to change the outcomes.** Consistently ineffective outcomes are generally the result of faulty system design, not the individuals in the system. If local decision-making disregards or inhibits participatory governance concerns, then focus on changing the structure, processes, procedures, and language that produces that result.
4. **Well-planned and facilitated meetings are essential.** Much can be accomplished in meetings with large groups of citizens, if the meetings are well planned, well facilitated, and designed to encourage productive citizen dialogue and work. The most effective community meetings combine succinct presentation of background information in a large group setting, with small group discussions to ensure that everyone talks, and everyone is heard.
5. **Collaboration takes time and resources.** Building collaborative work relationships among formal government structures and diverse citizen groups takes substantial time and some degree of money. Collaboration may be easier if some threshold of trust is established among potential partners before embarking on major community initiatives. Early efforts to create and build working collaborations are often “in addition” to the regular work programs of many local governments. Relationships are built over time in multiple formal and informal ways. The expanded demands and reduced resources for local governments in the US often results in collaboration project efforts being delayed by needs to address basic public services issues.
6. **Different generations participate differently.** A major issue in US communities is addressing the generational transition of power and community involvement from the ‘Baby Boom’ generation (born 1946-1964) to Gen X and Gen Y. Community process participants who are in their twenties or thirties differ substantially in how they use communication technology, in their attitudes toward work and relationships, social beliefs and recreational behaviors.
7. **Use a different language of citizenship.** An impediment to active citizenship participation is often the language of formal citizenship that defines politics as the work of elected politics, power as limited rather than relational, and citizens as passive rather than co-creators of public work. Model the importance of citizen leadership of the process and limit or de-emphasize the role and participation of formal government leaders, whether professional staff or elected.
8. **Insure timely communication to participants.** A vulnerability of citizen led and volunteer supported community processes such as Clear Vision is that routine administrative support for communicating with participants may falter. Bugs in Clear Vision’s web site and email system were not corrected until four months into the process. Incorrect email addresses result in some participants missing information and meetings, and ultimately withdrawing from the process. A variety of computer systems and software were used initially, and not all were compatible.
9. **Leadership opportunities for civil society organizations.** Most US local government organizations have traditional bureaucratic structures with core practices and procedures designed to be honest, fair, cost-effective, and predictable. However these organizational strengths also make it difficult for traditional government structures to adapt quickly or creatively to rapid or significant changes in the policy and issue environment of the organization. Policy innovation, especially in a fragmented decision environment, is often politically risky, and local governments in the US tend to be risk
averse. This creates a singular opportunity for civil society organizations or ad hoc citizen groups to use civic organizing to provide the leadership and impetus for decision and action.

IV. Conclusion
The Clear Vision strategic planning and visioning initiative uses an explicit civic organizing framework to overcome the lack of political will in a fragmented and decentralized decision-making environment in a local community in the US Upper Midwest. Political will is viewed in this instance not so much as the refusal of local governments to act but rather the structural inability of the community governance system (the three-legged stool of government, business, and civil society) to generate timely and responsive public policy decisions and result.

Some civic engagement advocates contend that effective citizenship depends upon people thinking of themselves as productive people who can build things and do things; people who come up with ideas and resources; and people who are bold and people who are accountable. The problem in many post-industrial communities is that there are few places where people can develop these capacities. Instead, people have learned to expect to get things from the government and to demand that experts or ‘professionals’ fix things. For many citizens, the civic dimension of their identity and how their work is tied to the rest of society- whether as a professional, or as a young person, parent, factory member, community member- is given little thought. This does not mean that people are apathetic about public affairs, but rather that they see themselves largely as outsiders and observers in the public arena, and they see their work in whatever role as isolated from larger problems and purposes.

In Eau Claire, civic organizing appears to be a promising strategy for reversing this behavior and overcoming the structural incapacity of a community to take action on complex, cross-boundary issues. Moreover, it would appear that a civic organizing approach for building political will could be replicated in other democratic political environments, especially those with fragmented and decentralized decision-making structures. The likelihood for success would improve further if there were active mediating institutions such as schools, voluntary associations and community organizations where citizens could learn and practice democratic and participatory problem-solving skills. What is essential, however, is that the organizing effort address all three reinforcing strategies: (1) provide civic training to improve people’s public problem-solving capacities; (2) develop public leadership skills of citizens and officials by strengthening public relationships through joint work in public problem solving; and (3) restructure political and civil society institutions to align them with participatory citizenship concepts.

While Clear Vision has been successful thus far, it is still too early to determine whether the initiative will have sustained success in building the civic organizing skills of citizens and embedding participatory governance in the civic culture as a customary way of conducting public work. This will require that the initiative transition successfully from planning into implementation by: (1) establishing ongoing administrative and fiscal support for the implementation structure that will coordinate follow-through on approved action plans; (2) securing a multi-year partnership to develop train-the-trainer programs to provide civic training for community members and civic learning programs for students; and (3) embedding participatory citizenship processes into the bureaucratic design of local government and community decision-making institutions.