

Peoria November 4th, 2010

Good morning. Let me start by thanking Mayor Barrett for his kind introduction and to Marty Rozelle and her team for the opportunity to be here. I am honored and delighted to have the chance to discuss a topic I care deeply about—public participation--from both a personal and professional perspective. And of course, I always love being back in Arizona—the state of my birth and my heart. I won't mention by U of A credentials in the land of the Sun Devils—bad form—but I will share what my dad used to say—that Arizona, being the home of John McCain, Barry Goldwater and Mo Udall, is the ONLY state in the Union where you cannot tell your children it is possible to grow up to be the President of the United States!

As the mayor said in his kind introduction, I come from a family where working toward the common good is part of my DNA—whether in the role of an elected official, a school teacher, a non-profit director or a public defender—to name just a few career paths of my siblings and cousins. I know, by your presence here today, that all of you are also engaged in the work of seeking common ground. My own path has been in the worlds of public education, civic engagement, civic leadership development and public policy.

Perhaps the initial experience as a young adult of working on my dad's presidential campaign in my early 20s (truly one of the highlights of my life—ah to have the time back when you thought you knew everything) was where I first began to appreciate both the challenges and rewards of engaging with the public.

Since then, in my more gainful employment over the past 30 years, I have been actively engaged in all kinds of public participation efforts. Prior to moving to Portland, the last ten years I led an institute where we designed and facilitated a wide variety of public processes. During that time, I was involved directly in at least 25 significant community issues—from homelessness to public education to early childhood-- that required intense public participation in many different forms. Over the past 15 years, in my role as vice chair of the Udall Foundation I have heard about and observed at least 100 more situations where it was imperative for people to work together in order to move forward.

This sustained 'on the ground' work has helped me formulate some deeply held beliefs about what works and doesn't work when you seek to engage people in what I call 'the work of the public square.'

Before we explore, together, these beliefs this full day session seems particularly timely, a mere full day after tumultuous and intense midterm elections throughout our country. This election, to me,

represents why the work we all do is so important. The act of voting is the symbol of public participation we most point to as evidence of an engaged public. To vote is to make your voice heard, to register an opinion and to actively participate as a citizen. Personally, I never quite lose the actual thrill of voting. It seems silly sometimes but it never loses its excitement for me.

And yet, this election also illustrates the challenges in motivating people to stay engaged, in authentic and meaningful ways. I continue to believe that as long as our elections are full of negative ads; pundits on TV basically advocating and never listening; debates instead of discussions, and the use of sound bites to define difficult choices we face—as long as we continue to reduce this important rite of public participation to this type of dynamic—we will lose the power of this fundamental public participation.

As we all know, though, voting is only one kind of public participation. All of you have many, many different examples of where you ask the public to be engaged. It can be through marches, or public hearings, or town hall meetings, or charrettes. At the heart of a democracy is our collective ability to engage in the larger civic arena, to step outside of our own private lives and care about the whole. It is through

engagement of many different kinds that we create healthy, vibrant communities.

Public participation comes from the belief that by gathering people together and **listening** to each other, we can find common ground to the challenges we face. It is a fairly simple hypothesis: that people can come together and solve problems. All of us are testing this hypothesis every time you engage in public participation. As noted in the promotional info about today's workshop, it is hard work. Voices are louder; time to give is shorter; stress is higher.

And yet, even in the face of louder voices, lesser time, and harder issues, public participation works!! I know this and you know this...we also know that it doesn't work! And it is truly some of the most exciting, uplifting work around. I want to explore my thinking about when and why it works—and to do so, in the spirit of our meeting, invite you to do so with me.

I want to test my ideas against yours, so take a moment to think about two public engagement efforts you have been involved in--one that worked (or is working) and one that didn't...it can be as simple as a single meeting or it can be more complicated, involving lots of stakeholders over a long period of time.

Now, identify some of the reasons public engagement worked in the one situation but didn't in the other. Now take a moment to talk with someone next to you about that. Make a quick list of the reasons, and hold on to them to compare to my list as I talk about them today.

Determine if you want to get any ideas.

What I would like to do is outline the nine conditions must be in place for authentic public participation:

1. people only participate in issues that matters to them.

What is the old joke about *the definition of apathy? I don't know and I don't care.* Folks show up for things that matter to them. The people who voted on Tuesday did so because the issues mattered to them. There are other reasons people may not show up to participate, but a fundamental condition has to be relevance to their lives and interests. This does not mean that you only seek out folks who have a position on an issue. This is an important distinction: caring about an issue and having a stand on an issue shows up very differently.

2. AND people have to feel like their participation will make a

difference. Generally, speaking the closer the issue is to people's own lives, the easier it is to engage them. Why did people vote on Tuesday? Because of the economy—it is a local issue for

people. One of the reasons I love community work is because it is closer to people's day to day realities. This is one reason that I think we are so stuck nationally; it is hard to get excited about a problem that feels so big that there is nothing that can be done. I also think your work can be very satisfying; people can often be motivated to engage on local issues because they can see how their involvement can make a difference.

3. **if you want to avoid a big mess, be sure to define why and how you want people to participate prior to beginning the work.**

Why do you want the public to be involved? What is the ultimate goal? Is it to voice opinions or make decisions? We have found in a small research project we did in Charlotte that folks don't mind being asked only for their opinions as opposed to actually making decisions—i.e., often the role of a public hearing; what they mind is not knowing up front what the rules of the game are.

(Committee that works for two years on what to do with a sports field and then disbanded them with a quick decision)

4. **Furthermore, you need to define 'public'.** This is a significant concept to grasp. So, when we are discussing public participation, do we mean activists or do we mean my next door neighbor? Who do we want to be involved, and to what level? People are often frustrated about public hearings, and it is because we often

use the term ‘public’ as shorthand for inviting all the ‘usual suspects’ and then we wonder why the only people who show up are the same ones that showed up at the last public hearing. If you want only the public you know, then it really won’t be authentic. Engaging a diverse, wide ranging group and looking for folks who do not have ‘a dog in the fight’ (as we say in the South) is a huge key to this work.

And, if you want a large segment of people to participate, you will work harder than you thought possible to bring them in to the public square. People have so much demand on their time these days. And to ask folks to give time to the public square is really hard. Sending out an email; doing a psa; putting something online will not do it. It requires unbelievable commitment to seeking people out and getting folks there. And you need creative, interesting techniques. Go to where the people are. (sending our interns to the all male rotary club to ask folks to attend our America Speaks townhall on children’s issues).

5. **Us vs. Them does not work very well.** When I was an assistant superintendent in Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools, the part of the job I disliked the most was attending ‘school boundary’ hearings. They were not hearings—they were opportunities for people, in a

long row, 3 minutes each, to state why the boundaries should not change for their school. These would go on for hours; and then we would do another one the next night or week. I would rather have a root canal than go to a school boundary hearing. There are lots of reasons the hearings didn't work, and we have covered a few of them already but the biggest reason was the fact that it was a zero sum game; everyone was pitted against everybody else and if you won, I would lose. If there is an Us vs. Them scenario going in, it will be hard to forge solutions. This means that when you gather people together, you need to encourage a spirit of collaboration. Get people thinking that it's possible to forge new solutions that work for all of the groups involved. Most importantly, be sure that folks know that the issue has not already been decided, it's not a foregone conclusion. Their voice matters. Which leads to the fifth condition:

6. **Once you get folks to show up, efficient, effective and fair processes will keep them there.** This means, more often than not, having a neutral convenor, a really well trained facilitator, a clear agenda, and defined ground rules agreed upon by the group. This is what the US Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution does in very entrenched environmental disputes.

7. You need a champion for the work. If you are an elected official, or you are an advocate for a particular point of view or outcome, first you need to develop a process to follow (which is the point I just made). But more than that, you need someone who can move the work forward with a passion for seeking common ground and working through conflict. This is someone with a commitment to the process and is seen as a trusted steward of the work. If the champion is associated with a particular point of view, this is not the role for them. A good example of a champion would be the role that Lee Hamilton and Thomas Kean played in co-chairing the 9/11 commission. After the work of the commission was done they championed its implementation.

8. Celebrate the small gains and understand the longevity of the work. The Einstein quote: *we cannot talk ourselves out of a situation we have walked ourselves into* is a gentle reminder that most of the time public participation work takes a long time. Recognizing that this work takes a long time also leads to the understanding that celebrating gains is important work. We forget that change can be measured in many different ways—in the building of trust for the next time; for the relationships that

are needed to continue; for the small victories that make up the larger ones.

As a good speaker knows, I am leaving the best for last. The eighth condition, which underlies everything else on my list is this:

As a good speaker knows, I am leaving the best for last. The eighth condition, which underlies everything else on my list is this:

9. it is all about relationships.

Take a moment to reflect on your lists of conditions. Think about the relationships that existed, or didn't exist, in your examples. I would predict, even bet, that most of the time—at the core of the success were the relationships that existed in the room. I am not talking about liking or disliking, although that can be a component. I am talking about the fact that trust is present. Trust is built from getting to know someone well; to listening without judgment; to keeping your word; to finding common interests. In the leadership program I ran in Charlotte—ALF—we developed trust by placing people in an OB course for five days. It worked every time. This is the level of trust you need to work toward in public participation. It is through trust that all work will get done.

Al Simpson, who is co-chairing the commission on reducing the federal deficit, said recently that ‘they are all still in the room talking. Trust took a long time to build.’”

And this brings me to the second part of the question posed in the materials: are you listening? True listening is at the core of getting any work done in the public square. Igor Stravinsky once said: *“To listen is an effort, and just to hear is no merit. A duck hears also.”* And another favorite quote by Andre Gide is this: ‘everything has been said before, but since nobody listens, we have to keep going back and beginning all over again.’”

When voices are loud, for whatever reason, listening is even more challenging. Hearing and listening are very, very different acts. Listening is about the ability to understand at a deep, deep level what motivates and matters to the individual who is talking to you. The act of listening is extremely difficult work. And, when answers are complex and multi-faceted, and voices loud, it is even harder. And finally, if we believe voices are louder from fear and anger we risk not being able to even hear what is said, much less listen.

These are my nine. What else did you notice with your own list? What have I missed or what did you think of as I was talking? I am not sure I have time to gather ideas, but during the day I hope you check out with

each other in your sessions other conditions you identified that make public participation successful.

I use these nine conditions—as a quick checklist when observing public participation. Questions I ask myself when I see lots of people engaged:

- HOW did they make sure all the voices were heard, not just the loud ones?
- WHO is doing the convening?
- WHO is doing the facilitating and what processes are they using that are getting great results?
- Who is championing the effort?
- What are the ground rules?
- What are the outcomes and how were those communicated in order to get buy-in?
- How do people know their work is going to make a difference?

Take every opportunity, today and in the future, to learn from the mistakes, but most importantly, learn from all the successes. There are lots of them!!

In conclusion, I want to share with you a quote from one of my favorites books on civic engagement; Peter Block's *On Community: The Structure of Belonging*. He says at the very beginning that "*the essential*

challenge is to transform the isolation and self-interest within our communities into connectedness and caring for the whole.” A key ingredient to transforming isolation is through public participation. Involving people in today’s crazy and hectic world is hard, but it is absolutely fundamental to a thriving democracy. The good news as the voices get louder and as we all work at listening, is that done well, public participation will contribute mightily to the health and well being of your communities. This is a simple but powerful fact.

I want to thank you all for the hard work you engage in every day. My dad use to quote an old saying: *A woman has made at least a start on discovering the meaning of human life when she plants shade trees under which she knows full well she will never sit.*

I am grateful to all of you for the trees you plant through the work you do and I wish you well in your journeys. I leave you with a favorite quote of mine: practice optimism beyond reason.