

Building Leadership Beyond Boundaries: The Sustainable Communities Approach

Myra L. Moss, District Specialist
Ohio State University Extension

And

William T. Grunkemeyer, Program Leader
Ohio State University Extension

Community planners, elected officials, educators, social service agencies, community developers and a host of other professionals talk about their community plans being driven by residents. Words like bottom-up, representative of the community, respecting diversity and a host of other phrases are used to display the feeling that the effected residents were the ones who orchestrated the outcomes. In 2000 such an attempt to create a plan controlled, created and implemented by residents was begun in Noble County, Ohio. The Ohio State University Extension, Sustainable Development Team created a planning program entitled Sustainable Communities. Built on sustainable development concepts the Sustainable Communities Program sought to implement a planning process that defined an acceptable balance between the economic, social and environmental aspects of a community. At the heart of this effort were four cornerstones of sustainable development:

long-term focus

interconnection of economy and equity and environment

multi-dimensional indicators

an inclusionary process

The remainder of this paper will share some insight gained concerning leadership development based on the two cornerstones of inclusionary and multi-dimensional indicators.

Sustainable Communities

The Sustainable Communities Program was designed to help interested communities establish a template for their future based around the sustainable development goal of finding balance between the economic, social and environmental aspects of the community. Working with a team of faculty from the Community Development Program Area of Ohio State University Extension, a community would apply a two-year planning process to define what made them a sustainable community. The plan was to extend the definitions of traditional planning processes in many ways. First the Sustainable Communities Process defined long-term as a period of at least fifty years. Fifty years caused most participants to think about the community their grandchildren or great-grandchildren

would call home. Next the planning process desired to struggle with finding an acceptable balance between plans that focused on economic concerns, plans that were intended to bring about social good and concerns and interest of plans designed to protect environmental concerns. To accomplish these two goals it was necessary to address the third cornerstone of sustainable development. An inclusionary process that provided equal authority and opportunity to the residents of the community needed to be designed and implemented. Without an inclusionary process residents of the community would not be able to claim the template produced as their own. The Sustainable Communities Program is about planning but more importantly it is about residents educating each other about the assets and potentials of their community. Also, if residents are to truly claim the template as theirs they must understand the goals they establish, accept responsibility for implementing projects to maintain or reach those goals and finally monitor the success of living within their sustainable definition through indicators of success. Therefore, the fourth cornerstone of sustainable development addressed was creation of multi-dimensional indicators. These indicators should integrate the indicators of existing economic, social and environmental organizations, agencies, groups and individuals. It is within the building of an inclusionary process and the creation of multi-dimensional indicators that leadership boundaries must be pushed to bring about a long-term success in implementing daily decisions that implement the fragile balance between a community's economic, social and environmental sectors. Unless residents have a new access to becoming leaders and enhancing their leadership skills, the template built during the Sustainable Communities Program will at best be barely remembered. Being a sustainable community requires daily decisions by leaders and residents. It requires that each person accept responsibility for maintaining the ethos needed to make the difficult daily decisions. There is also the need for each resident to pass on to the next generation the essence of the template created. This was the challenge Noble County Commissioners accepted when they invited the Extension Sustainable Communities Team to visit with the community about implementing the planning process.

Being Inclusionary

The Sustainable Communities Program defines inclusionary as breaking down barriers to individual participation. To be truly inclusionary each resident must have access to share his or her gifts, ideas and desires. To be certain not all residents will find value in being involved when the opportunity arrives. Personal situations or other priorities may cause an individual to opt out of the process. Our definition of inclusionary can only accept an individual's decision to personally opt out as an acceptable reason for their not participating. An individual's lack of involvement because we denied them access is not acceptable.

Every planning process has a steering committee. Traditionally, each planning program has a sponsor who spearheads the process and identifies the organizations that will be brought to the table. Leadership in this model is centralized, sanctions the process and then invites others to participate. Often the sponsor even goes as far as to select the

representative to the steering committee from the invited organization. Unfortunately, this attitude surfaced in the beginning of building a steering committee in Noble County. The County Extension Community Development Agent assumed that Extension was to direct the Noble Sustainable Communities Program. A reputational survey was used with the good intention that this would be inclusionary. This method led to a potential steering committee makeup that was predominately one gender, the members of generation x, people involved with agriculture and residents from the western part of the county. This approach did not meet our test for being inclusionary. At this time it became clear that although the County Commissioners did indeed initiate the process, it would take the authorization of residents themselves to make the project personal. It was clear that the project would not happen unless a significant number of organizations and entities throughout the community saw value in the effort and agreed to take two actions:

1. To sanction the sustainable communities program, and
2. To select and appoint a representative to the steering committee.

A new method to identify members of the steering committee was then attempted using Lasswell's Categories for Value/Institutions (Lasswell, no date given). Lasswell identifies eight sectors of a community which, when viewed in their totality, includes all of the interests and stakeholders in a community. Use of this method led to the inclusion of groups that were not involved traditionally in a community-wide leadership role. Even groups that were seen as antagonistic by the mainstream were identified as potential participants.

We found that Lasswell's categories provided an acceptable standard to break down barriers to leadership. Once groups were identified by using these categories, a member of the Ohio State University Extension Sustainable Communities Team visited the identified organizations. The Extension Team was used to make initial contact because it was realized that the Commissioners simply initiated the concept, and that Extension had developed and was testing it so they could more effectively explain it to the community. Over the next three months, thirty-four organizations identified through the application of Lasswell's categories were contacted. The contact happened at a regular meeting of the organization during which time a summary of the Noble Sustainable Communities Program was shared. Each organization visited was asked to sanction the process and select a representative to participate in the steering committee. Twenty-seven of the thirty-four contacts sanctioned the program and identified a representative. An interesting surprise occurred next. Six organizations that were not contacted asked to be included on the steering committee. Of course, all six were included to the Futures Council, which was the name selected by the steering committee to identify themselves and their role. Throughout the effort the sponsoring entities maintained control of the process. The lesson learned is that by applying a non-biased, universal schematic like Lasswell's categories it was assured that groups often overlooked were included. Even when existing leaders intend to be inclusionary, it is often impossible for them to step back from their perceptions of the community to accurately identify all of the sectors that need to be brought into leadership

involvement. A second lesson learned was for leadership to be inclusionary domain must be held within the participating organizations and entities. The only way to assure that domain is for each organization to decide whether or not the project happens and if it does, who will represent them in the process.

Meeting Where People Gather

Every planning effort that involves input from community residents struggles with how to gain participation. Various methods are tried. Some planning processes try to be inclusionary by selecting leaders from various stakeholder groups to participate in creating the plan. These selected leaders are expected to speak for the group they represent, to take results to their respective group and to bring feedback to the planning committee. Another model seeks input from community residents through public meetings held in a central location at a time that planners hope will encourage the largest participation by residents. The proposed plan is then presented and input is gathered from those who attend. Both of these methods are limited in their ability to build meaningful participation and leadership in the planning process from community residents. Whoever has witnessed a poorly attended Community Development Block Grant public meeting or experienced resident controversy just at the point when a project believed to have concurrence is about to be implemented, realizes the inherent limitations in both of these approaches. The difficulty with these methods is who is assigned leadership responsibility. Those in public positions have assumed it is their knowledge that will create a viable plan. What they are asking from residents is simply a blessing and adoption.

In contrast, the sustainable communities approach seeks to break down the boundaries to resident participation and leadership by recognizing that residents are the holders of the knowledge needed to bring success. In this model elected and appointed leadership clearly backs away and asks the residents to take responsibility for leading the creation of the community vision. This new paradigm now must find a way to get to people. The Sustainable Noble Program decided the best way to reach people was by going to where people gather. By going to a location where people already feel comfortable, associating with peers and in familiar surroundings, it was hoped that participation will be encouraged. The only acceptable reason for not participating is the resident's own decision to not attend.

The Futures Council took on responsibility for the planning of vision sessions by identifying those places and times to hold the community vision meetings based on where residents gathered. The ease with which residents could attend the meetings became a key emphasis in the selection of locations, expanding the possibilities well beyond government complexes and community halls. Another important consideration was to select locations and groups that mirrored the demographic profile of the county. A third consideration involved the time of the meeting. The Futures Council decided that many of these sessions could be held to piggyback with already scheduled meetings and community events

to take advantage of groups that were already gathered. As a result, the following groups/locations were chosen for vision sessions:

1. local governments
2. agencies
3. public schools
4. service clubs
5. community festivals
6. churches

To help in facilitating these vision sessions, volunteers from the Noble Leadership Development Program were trained to facilitate the process. Having local residents volunteer to facilitate these sessions helped residents to become visually aware that Sustainable Noble is their effort rather than the creation of traditional community leaders or a professionally hired staff.

The vision sessions were centered around two questions:

1. What do you value most about your community? (Treasures)
2. What do you hope your community will become for your grandchildren and great-grandchildren? (Rainbows)

Participation rates for the vision sessions varied. We learned that some methods were much more effective than others in defining where people gather. Vision sessions were held in fourteen of the fifteen townships, usually at the township hall, at the insistence of the County Commissioners. We found that these meetings were only effective and well attended when the township clerk informally and personally promoted the event to his/her neighbors. Other public officials were not as successful in encouraging participation. We also tried community surveys. They were distributed at the meetings and people were asked to share them with friends and family who couldn't attend. Only a handful of the hundreds of surveys that were distributed were returned. In total, thirty-eight vision sessions were held throughout the county. In addition to the townships and villages, sessions were held at the Caldwell High School and Shenandoah High School government and English classes, Extension Advisory Committee meeting, senior companions, senior citizen meetings, Teens for Tomorrow program, regional planning meeting, health department meetings, Caldwell Fireman's Festival, Ministerial Association, Noble County Fair, Farm Bureau annual banquet, Retail Merchants Association, civic organizations, Community Action Organization and Chamber of Commerce to name a few. In all, seven hundred and fifty two persons over the age of 14 shared their feelings and provided leadership in the setting of direction for Noble County. This effort of going to where people gather successfully reached a cross section of the community by age, gender, income, occupation and geographic location.

An important lesson learned was that when residents were engaged within surroundings familiar to them, rather than to the facilitator, and were with familiar people a free sharing of ideas occurred. People would throw out an idea, and often it was built upon by others. Ideas were recorded on sheets of paper hanging on walls. During festivals participants would bring their friends over to see that their idea was up on the sheet and was being used and included in the vision process. These residents felt ownership and sense of pride in their contribution as leaders in determining a Sustainable Noble. No comments were edited or modified, and all appeared in the final report to the community. The vision statements that came out of these comments were built totally from the resident's ideas, thoughts and feelings with no editing or the setting of allowable parameters from local public officials. Another important lesson learned was when people talked, it centered around what was possible rather than what was a problem or couldn't be accomplished. An exciting realization was that these vision sessions resulted in a ripple effect. Residents participating at one session would take responsibility for bringing the vision session to other groups to which they belonged.

Indicators

Resident's leadership in the determination of Noble County's future was enabled through the vision sessions. The challenge then became how to evaluate and monitor progress toward reaching these goals in a way that insures that the resident's definition of success is the guide. Also keeping with sustainable communities, the importance of building an interconnection in this evaluation process between the economy, society and environment is paramount. Desiring to continue the effort of residents being leaders a session was planned for Future Council members to share their organizations existing indicators. The goal was to show the connection between indicators held in esteem by economic groups, social groups and environmental groups. Members of the Future Council enjoyed sharing their indicators and everyone gained a deeper knowledge of what was valuable to other groups.

Unfortunately, the task of combining indicators is a strenuous task that requires great attention to detail. It was also discovered that indicators seem to be items that are understood by organizations and individual but often not written out. Rather than spend hours working on connecting indicators as a group, the Future Council members selected a task force to take the indicators already shared and weave them into multi-dimensional indicators for consideration by the total group. This was a disappointment to the Extension Sustainable Development Team, but even disappointment can be a viable teacher of lessons. What the Extension team discovered was that when resident leadership assigned technical tasks to experts is was an act of leadership. What is important is not what was done but who took the action, how they took it and why. Residents were the leaders in assigning the indicator task. Certainly elected officials and appointed officials were involved in the Future Council but they were not in a position of legislative or executive authority. They were one voice mixed with resident based organizations. How the assignment was made is also a valuable lesson in pushing boundaries of leadership. Again it

is important to look at what was not assigned. The Future Council members did not assign the task force the role of creating new indicators. They simply were to take indicators created by each group and connect them as multi-dimensional indicators. Nor did the Future Council members empower the task force to legitimize these newly created multi-dimensional indicators as the new guiding lights for the community. The task force was to simply play a role of synthesizing the indicators. Finally why the Future Council acted as they did is important. They assigned this task because it was efficient. A clear lesson in the develop of multi-dimensional indicators was that leadership still resides with the residents provided they maintain the ability to accept work assigned to experts and make the choice of what is appropriate action for experts to accomplish. Leadership does not always need to do the tasks themselves. Leadership simply needs to not abdicate it's decision-making role.

Lessons Learned in Pushing Leadership Boundaries

The Noble Sustainable Communities Project has provided some valuable lessons to Extension Faculty regarding successful methods for pushing leadership boundaries to residents of a community. A desire of the Extension Sustainable Development Team was to move towards a more inclusionary approach in building a template for a community to design, implement and monitor a sustainable ethos. It was clear from the beginning that unless new methods were discovered to empower residents as leaders in this process what was gained would not be lasting. For a geographical community to be sustainable members of a community must daily assume responsibility for making individual decisions that honor this sustainable ethos. Each resident must see himself or herself as the keeper of the community's interest and realize the connection of the environmental, social and economic parts of their lives. In other words, each resident must take on a leadership role rather than advocate the responsibility to elected and appointed officials. How to make sustainability a part of each resident's life is a challenging task. The only potential way imaginable to make this happen is to build an inclusionary process that breaks down barriers to residential leadership access.

The following lessons learned from trying to build an inclusionary concept into the Sustainable Noble Project may provide some insight to pushing existing definitions of leadership boundaries:

1. *Using a non-biased, universal schematic increases participation in leadership cycles by often-ignored groups.* The use of Lasswell's Categories for Value/Institutions yielded invitations to be part of the project steering committee to groups not normally invited into leadership roles. This helped the geographical community of Noble County think about the communities of interest that existed within the county's borders. The use of this schematic made it possible for elected and appointed leaders to think about groups they knew should be included but did not on a regular basis have contact with. The schematic simply made everyone more conscious of who was part of their community.

2. *For residents to be leaders they must have the ability to sanction to be included as part of the domain.* Instead of having a sponsor or group of sponsors for the Sustainable Noble Project, communities of interest decided if the project was valuable to the community. For the project to happen a significant number of resident based groups had to sanction the effort. What resulted was the project belonged to no one yet it belonged to everyone.
3. *Communities of interest must be free to determine who will represent them in the geographical community.* Each group who sanctioned the Sustainable Noble Project was free to decide who would be their voice when the total geographical community gathered. What emerged were residents assuming leadership roles who had never before been identified as a leadership position within the total community. These emerging leaders provided access to residents who traditionally did not participate in community decision-making. They also brought a fresh perspective to what Noble County was about.
4. *Identify residents of a geographical community as leaders by meeting where they gather in their community of interest.* There were very few organizations or neighborhoods that turned down the opportunity of holding a vision session as part of one of their regular meeting agendas. Also there were very few people present within these sessions that did not speak. Residents of Noble County felt free to share their dreams, visions and ideas because they were in a place that was comfortable to them. At times facilitators were the ones who were uncomfortable because they were the ones in an unfamiliar environment. What emerged though was an honest exchange of ideas with learning from and by all sides. And participation rates were high.
5. *People would support the project and accept others ideas where their individual ideas are recognized.* To date the summary of the Noble County definition of finding a sustainable balance between the environment, economics and social dimensions of life have been accepted. A key reason has been that throughout the process everyone saw that their ideas and thoughts had a fair hearing, even to the point that it is still part of the definition of what makes Noble County Sustainable. This fact is evident because projects within the template have been undertaken by various groups in the community. One of note is the renovation of an abandoned school under the leadership of a group that was always seen as antagonistic to the community. Another example is the designation of selected water and sewer projects as high priority by county officials. Public officials saw these projects as difficult before the community residents took leadership in defining the future. Now residents groups are helping to promote support of the utility extension projects.
6. *Leadership does not mean you do it yourself.* Residents are still playing a leadership role when they assign technical tasks to experts who have the time and

knowledge necessary to complete the task. What is important is the fact that residents decide when it is appropriate to use experts. Also important in this exchange is residents maintaining ownership of the materials used by the experts in completing the task. In the Noble County case residents, for example, are not advocating leadership roles when experts create the multi-dimensional indicators because the base indicators are owned by the residents and the task assigned the experts is specific with final approval in the hands of residents.

Pushing boundaries of leadership is something residents will welcome and respond to within a sustainable communities setting. The very definition of sustainability requires no less. Indeed, it takes more time to complete your project planning, but more time spent in the beginning will lead to greater implementation and ownership of the template created. Residents were prepared and willing to assume those leadership roles. What is also interesting is those residents who chose not to be involved have remained silent as those who engaged move forward the community-wide vision.

REFERENCES

Cunningham, L. L. *Lasswell's Value/Institutional Categories*. Presented to education class. Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.

Kolzow, D.R. 1991. **Strategic Planning for Economic Development**. Rosemont, IL. American Economic Development Council

About the Authors

Bill Grunkemeyer is the Program Leader for Community Development and Economic Development with Ohio State University Extension. Together with the Extension Sustainable Communities Team, he is developing an inclusionary process for setting up a sustainable development strategy for small to midsize communities. Myra Moss is a Community Development district Specialist with Ohio State University Extension. As a member of the Sustainable Communities Team for extension and specialist in the district which includes Noble County, she has been involved with the development and implementation of the program at the local level.

William Grunkemeyer
Assistant Professor
The Ohio State University Extension, Community Development
700 Ackerman Road, Suite 235
Columbus, Ohio 43202
Ph: (614)292-5942
Grunkemeyer.1@osu.edu

Myra Moss
Assistant Professor
The Ohio State University Extension, East District
16714 SR 215
Caldwell, Ohio 43724
Ph: (740) 732-2381
Moss.63@osu.edu