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Saving Land but Losing Ground
Challenges to Community Planning
in the Era of Participation

Michael Hibbard & Susan Lurie

A quarter century or more of normative planning theory has argued that planning should be participatory (e.g., see Friedmann 1973; Yiftachel 1998; Sandercock 1998). And a body of empirical studies has found that mainstream planning practice is participatory in some sense (e.g., see Innes 1995; Ozawa and Seltzer 1999). At the same time, however, there is a competing body of empirical studies that disputes the claim that planning is participatory in any meaningful way (e.g., see Tauxe 1995; Flyvbjerg 1998). As participation becomes more and more prominent in shaping the practice of local government planning, it is important to try to shed light on this apparent contradiction. To that end, we have investigated the process through which the most recent comprehensive plan was developed for Jackson/Teton County, Wyoming. The result of that process was a loss of public confidence in government and planning.

This is a particularly apt case. Wyoming is a bastion of the Western American value of local control; the people have a long history of trying to resolve their community problems themselves. And Teton County is an environmentally, economically, and culturally sensitive area experiencing protracted rapid growth. The comprehensive planning process raised a number of difficult matters on which local opinion was sharply divided. The community’s culture of abundant social capital might have enabled it to make good use of participatory planning but, in the end, that was not the case. Our study is an exploration of why participatory planning failed to achieve its potential in a community with a history of local problem solving.

Before we introduce our case study, a short theoretical discussion will be helpful.

Participation, Social Capital, and Planning Theory

Peter Marris (1998) has argued that the purpose of planning is to articulate and resolve, to the greatest extent possible, the tensions between the political, economic, and civil functions of a society as its diverse human membership tries to find their place in the planning process. The process through which the most recent comprehensive plan was developed for Jackson/Teton County, Wyoming, is an exploration of why participatory planning failed to achieve its potential in a community with a history of local problem solving.

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Abstract

Over the past quarter century, normative planning theory has argued that planning should be participatory. And a body of empirical studies has found that mainstream planning practice is participatory in some sense. At the same time, however, there is a competing body of empirical studies that disputes the claim that planning is participatory in any meaningful way. As participation becomes more and more prominent in shaping the practice of local government planning, it is important to try to shed light on this apparent contradiction. To that end, the authors have investigated the development of the most recent comprehensive plan for Jackson/Teton County, Wyoming. What appeared to be a process of high involvement and inclusiveness did not lead to community consensus around the plan, nor did it affirm the merits of planning. This study is an exploration of why participatory planning failed to achieve its potential in a community with a history of local problem solving.

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in it and fulfill their needs. Participatory planning processes have been posited as the most flexible way of responding to ongoing rearrangements in those tensions, by providing meaningful opportunities for local communities to deal directly with the issues they face (e.g., see Campbell and Fainstein 1996; Jennings 1998). Proponents of participation argue that it will lead to superior problem solving because the community interest is easier to define and secure when there is active citizen involvement (Kemmis 1995; Staeheli 1997).

Arriving at the common interest requires two elements. The first is decision makers and staff committed to and competent at a participatory planning process. In this view, planning is best understood more as communicative action than as technical analysis (Forester 1989; Healy 1996). It is supported by empirical studies of practice that have found that planners spend more time and psychic energy working to communicate effectively with a wide range of colleagues and publics than on analysis and logical argumentation (Innes 1995; Ozawa and Seltzer 1999).

However, the efficacy of participatory planning in any given situation also depends on a second element. It is the presence in the local social structure of those things that enable the actions of individuals working toward a collective goal—what has come to be called social capital.

Jane Jacobs apparently coined the term social capital in her classic, The Death and Life of Great American Cities (1961, 134), but Robert Putnam (1993, 1995) has brought it into general usage. By social capital, Jacobs and Putnam mean the combination of dense social networks and shared norms of trust and reciprocity that create a robust environment for civic engagement.

When it is functioning effectively, social capital promotes norms of generalized reciprocity. People are willing to take action in the present, trusting that some other community member will reciprocate at some point in the future. Social capital also facilitates communication and trust. When political dealings are embedded in dense networks of social interaction, incentives for selfishness are minimized and benevolence becomes the norm. And finally, those ongoing networks embody past successes and serve as cultural templates for future problem-solving efforts. Stocks of social capital are thus self-reinforcing and cumulative; success in one effort builds connections and trust that carry over into other endeavors. This suggests that where social capital is strong, citizens should usually be able to work through their differences on community issues, even in the face of firm divisions.

A conundrum immediately emerges regarding planning and the common interest. Many empirical studies have found that communicative planning is the dominant mode of practice. But at the same time, other studies report that many people are systematically excluded from participating in the planning process (Yiftachel 1998). How can we work through this apparent contradiction to attain the promised benefits of participation? That is the focus of our study.

**Methodology**

Our approach was purely inductive. We made no attempt to hypothesize a priori what we would find. We first developed a brief history of Jackson Hole, based largely on secondary sources and focusing on the local culture and early planning efforts. We then took a detailed look at Jackson/Teton County’s most recent planning experience, using a range of standard qualitative research techniques to lead us to some inferences about local control and planning practice.

Our primary research consisted of interviews with seventeen citizens and eight officials who were actively involved in the process of developing the new comprehensive plans for the town of Jackson and Teton County between 1990 and 1994. Names of interviewees were obtained from public meeting rosters. Interviews consisted of eleven open-ended questions about the process and its outcomes. Interviewees were selected to reflect opinions on land use planning that ranged from support to opposition. The interviews included people with businesses directly affected by planning and those with no monetary incentive to either support or oppose planning. There was also a range of experience among interviewees, from those who dealt with planning as part of their occupations to those with no planning experience. Each interview was tape-recorded and then transcribed. Transcriptions were reviewed by the interviewees to confirm the accuracy of their thoughts were accurately represented.

In addition to the interviews, data came from approximately one hundred informal conversations with people in Jackson and Teton County between 1990 and 1997, from a search of relevant public records, and from reading all articles about the evolving planning process in both of the local weekly newspapers for the period from 1990 to 1994.

Finally, two officials and two citizens who had been interviewed reviewed a draft of this article to confirm the accuracy of facts and impressions.

**The Story of Jackson/Teton County**

Teton County is part of the rugged, internationally famous mountain country of northwestern Wyoming. Less than 3 percent of its 643 square miles is privately owned. Most of it is in federal ownership comprising a portion of Yellowstone and all of Grand Teton national parks, several national forests, and a

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national elk refuge. There is also some state land. Teton County’s settlements include the town of Jackson, incorporated in 1901, and several smaller, isolated, unincorporated communities. The county’s center is the fifty-mile-long Jackson’s Hole, more commonly referred to as Jackson Hole. In 1996, the Wyoming State Data Center estimated the population of the valley as around 13,300, though that figure has been questioned by local officials as being too low.

From the beginning of permanent white settlement, the dominant sources of livelihood in Teton County were a combination of cattle ranching and outdoor tourism, especially guiding wealthy clientele on big game hunting trips. This is the country of Owen Wister and Frederick Remington, Teddy Roosevelt and the Rough Riders—wealthy easterners who admired and respected the character of the westerners and romanticized their way of life. Beginning about 1908, dude ranches, many of them started by and/or catering to these same wealthy easterners, rapidly became a new and significant source of income in Teton County (Betts 1978). The result was a society quite different from most other isolated, sparsely populated valleys in the Rocky Mountain West (Johnson 1972; Peirce 1993; Smith 1992). It was an oddly compatible community in which homestead stock and wealthy visitors regularly rubbed shoulders with one another in an unusual social and economic mix.

It was a classless society full of class, where the swagger of Western horsemen blended on equal terms with the swagger of adventurous, anticonventional Eastern aristocracy . . . unlike a middle-class society where everyone has to kowtow to a norm to avoid the offenses of superiority—a Middle Western democracy based on the equality of everyone being alike—people in the old Jackson Hole remained separate but equal, flamboyantly themselves without fear of what the neighbors might think; it was the classlessness of individuality—a Far Western democracy based on everyone being different. (Burt 1983, 9-10)

The inherent rifts in the community began to show as early as 1918, with the controversy over a proposal to transfer federal land from the U.S. Forest Service to the National Park Service to create Grand Teton National Park. Support for the park was based on an instinctive aversion to commercial development of a unique landscape; opposition on an equally instinctive aversion to government control (Burt 1983).

By the time Grand Teton National Park took its present form in 1942, both factions included at least two points of view regarding land control and uses. Some of the park proponents took this position because of an emotional attachment to the landscape, others because they believed that continued prosperity depended on preservation of the valley’s “natural” state. Among the opponents, some feared that formation of the park would curtail their profits, whereas others objected on philosophical (or emotional) grounds to government in any form.

The rancorous controversy over federal versus local control—and private use and development rights versus community rights and preservation of the unique landscape as part of local heritage—has been an ongoing feature of planning in Jackson Hole since this first instance.

Planning and Change in Teton County

After World War II, Jackson Hole was “discovered” by family vacationers, and tourism increased dramatically. Although Teton County began to change in the 1940s, until the mid-1970s Jackson remained a mixture of locally owned businesses that served the ranching and resident community as well as tourist interests. It was common to find a western art gallery or neon-bordered bar and restaurant next to a hardware or sundries store. The local sporting goods store carried a mix of ski equipment and ranch needs such as saddles and boots.

Business conversion, a reflection of social changes in the valley, started slowly in the late 1970s and then accelerated in the 1980s toward chain and franchise businesses, upscale boutiques, and strip malls.

Teton County residents were concerned with the growth and associated commercial development that accompanied the emergence of Jackson/Teton County as a tourist mecca. In 1968, the Teton County Board of Commissioners established the Teton County Planning Commission. With much public involvement and loud controversy over regulation of land use, the county commissioners passed the first master plan in 1970. The town of Jackson did not participate in the planning efforts, and the county’s planning provisions did not apply to the town.

Continuing anxiety about the impact of rapid growth on valley character led to a new planning effort in 1975. It took more than two and a half years to produce the new plan. The process included public meetings and workshops and a series of questionnaires to gather input; it was again accompanied by heated arguments from supporters and opponents of new regulations, each accusing decision makers of capitulating to demands from the “other side.” In December 1977, the plan, to become effective 1 January 1978, was adopted by a two-to-one vote of the three-member County Commission. The town of Jackson again opted out of comprehensive planning.

The 1990-1994 Planning Process

In the early 1990s, it became apparent to residents and local decision makers that provisions of the 1978 plan were no longer adequate to protect the valley’s distinctive landscape.
The population doubled between 1970 and 1980 (from 4,823 to 9,355), then increased a further 18 percent (to 11,100) by 1990. Moreover, the character of Jackson Hole is changing. Typical visitors are no longer members of the eastern gentry looking for a vestige of the western frontier experience by rubbing shoulders with homegrown characters at a dude ranch. Nor are they middle-class tourist families on summer camping vacations who are shopping for T-shirts and ice cream cones. Both have been substantially replaced by upscale visitors staying at destination resorts, skiing in the winter and golfing in the summer, dining on nouvelle cuisine, and shopping in art galleries. The latter, very wealthy visitors have also begun to establish permanent residence in the valley, significantly upsetting the local economy. In 1994, Teton County ranked as the seventh wealthiest in the United States in per capita income, below Somerset County, New Jersey, but ahead of Westchester County, New York (Huffman 1997). And the median price of a single family home in Teton County in 1996 was $659,921 (Schechter 1997).

The large areas of open space and abundant wildlife populations were threatened as former ranch lands were sold and subdivided for resorts, log mansions, and ranchettes. The need for a more effective plan was crystallized when the county engineer presented the county transportation master plan in 1990. A build-out population of 60,000 was projected, based on the existing land use plan. To accommodate the mix of tourist and increased local traffic, traditional two-lane roads throughout the county were to be converted in places to six-lane highways (Sellett 1990).

The projected population and its impacts became the catalyst for a third planning process, this time as a joint effort by the town and county. Like those before it, the process again became a struggle between those who hoped that regulation could preserve Teton County’s special character and those who opposed regulation on the grounds that it interfered with private property rights and free enterprise.

In 1990, an ad hoc group (including business leaders, environmentalists, and other community activists) organized a series of community involvement workshops that the town and county partially sponsored. Elected officials, planning staff, consultants, and citizens then engaged in a long and elaborate process for developing a new plan. Although the original target for plan completion was eighteen months, the process took nearly four years to complete. In addition to time, costs also ran well beyond the original estimate.

The opportunities for comment and input at public workshops and hearings numbered in the dozens. If planning commission meetings and workshops to hear decision makers discuss the issues and then submit written questions and comments are included, some officials estimate that the opportunities for formal involvement topped the two hundred mark.

But what appeared to be a process of high involvement, inclusiveness, and appropriate decision making did not lead to a community consensus around the plan. A newspaper survey in early 1994 reported that 68 percent of the respondents thought that maintaining community character should be the primary planning goal. And though 55 percent supported adoption of the new plan, only 24 percent felt that the new plans would reach the stated goal (Thuermer 1994). One citizen who had participated extensively in the process remarked, “The more planning there’s been, the worse it’s gotten.”

Citizens and officials alike expressed disappointment regarding the ability of the 1990-1994 planning process to function as a mechanism to achieve consensus on the merits of planning. Our aim with this research is to try to understand why—despite everyone’s evident desire to have it otherwise—the planning process failed to become an exercise in identifying the collective good. How could this elaborate participatory planning process, applied in a community with a strong sense of civic engagement, result in a dissensus about public issues?

▶ The Community and the Process

Community Changes

The physical changes to Jackson/Teton County—subdivision of ranches, loss of open space and wildlife habitat, and other aspects of the urbanization process—are a major concern to many residents and local officials.

I think a real effort was made and I think some results came about, [but] I’m not sure what they were. To tell the truth, I’m worried…. We now have a little city. We have no grocery store downtown.

However, the physical changes are symbolic of an even greater social-cultural concern. As one resident wrote in a guest editorial about a friend who was leaving the valley,

Please, I pleaded (cause I happen to like the lady and think her leaving will be a loss), what is it that’s getting to you? “Trust,” she said, “When my car breaks down at night, I no longer know without a doubt that someone who cares will stop and help.”

And since that conversation, she’s got me thinking. People can stand a lot of change in a place so long as it doesn’t strike at the heart of their feelings about the world around them. And the changes in Jackson Hole are beginning to push the limit. (Gray 1990, 5)
The sense of community togetherness that Burt (1983) had earlier observed is breaking down, not only because of rapid change but also because of the nature of the change. Interviewees reported that the large numbers of new and often quite wealthy year-round and part-time homeowners are creating a social split that did not exist in the past. No longer knowing one’s neighbors well is an injury to many long-time residents. And the impact of the loss of neighborliness is exacerbated by the reality that many of the newcomers see their opulent homes as personal retreats rather than symbols of their stake in the community.

While cultural shifts are more complex than invasion by the silk-stocking crowd, the conspicuousness of that group serves as both a discrete problem of visible and significant dimension and as a proxy for community changes in general. The appearance of increasing numbers of luxury homes and their occupants contradicts the image that old-timers have of Jackson/Teton County as a modest but rugged built environment embraced by the spectacular natural environment.

There were few ranches left by the time the 1990-1994 planning cycle began, and even fewer when the new plans were adopted. Nevertheless, the continuing importance to the community of its image as a traditional small western town is reflected in the vision section of the Teton County Comprehensive Plan, which includes a community desire to “preserve the traditions and character of the Rocky Mountain West and Wyoming, including ranching” (Teton County Commissioners 1994, 1-7).

There was a high level of commitment to the planning process. The prevailing attitude was captured in one participant’s comment: “[I hoped that] there would actually be a step in the process toward creating a system for good land use patterns and for building good community.” The plans, in fact, incorporate some innovative strategies for protection of wildlife populations and aesthetics, but people were plainly interested in more than design standards and open space preservation. The overriding concern, mentioned often by citizens ranging from professionals to ranchers and representing varied outlooks, was cultural conversion. As one interviewee, a lifetime resident, remarked, “I never left Jackson. Jackson left me.” How could the planning process have failed to address this widely held central issue?

Power Sharing and Process Competency

The theory of participation calls for planning processes that actively communicate all proposals to the public and provide meaningful opportunities to respond (Kingsley 1996). It does not necessarily mean the direct participation of citizens in public decision making. In Wyoming, the tradition of local control carries with it a tradition of strong local leadership. This presents complex problems for both citizens and officials in an era of demand for increased citizen participation. Discussion of who decides what and under what conditions was not a part of the civic dialogue that led up to the 1990-1994 round of comprehensive planning in Jackson/Teton County. Its absence led to problems in three important ways.

First, the tradition of top-down leadership led to the selection and appointment of a planning consultant and choice of a planning approach with little public discussion and no involvement of citizens in thinking through possible alternative approaches. The result, according to contemporary newspaper accounts, was a high level of resentment toward decision makers and the planner (Simpson 1991a, 1991b).

Local elected officials, sensitized by public reaction to their hiring decision, did not renew the consultant’s contract when it expired. And they became consumed with concern for a participatory process. One of them lamented in an interview,

The process became the thing. It wasn’t the work product anymore, it was the process. We had to uphold the almighty process. I think we would have turned out with a better document if some of us elected officials had stood up halfway through the thing and said, “We’re going to show some leadership here.”

The lack of agreement regarding appropriate leadership roles in these evolving circumstances seriously affected the relationship between citizens and government. Assuming that effective process is something that follows good intentions, officials struggled to find the right balance between top-down and bottom-up approaches, simultaneously alienating those who favored more participation and those who thought citizen involvement had become excessive. The upshot was public reactions ranging from skepticism to hostility.

I think there were a lot of people upset with this [process]. The time that was taken was not trying to involve the community. It was taken trying to perfect a technical plan that had already been decided on by the [consultant and] the planning office and planning commissions. . . . The community got left out somewhere in the process.

But in the words of another participant,

I suppose that some group of people has to hash out the details, but my God, the way they hashed it out in this valley. . . . I think that, after the planning commissions got that document and had it for two-and-a-half years or so, with 300 to 700 more meetings and zillions more hours, it just wore everyone out.

The second problem flows out of the demand for greater public involvement and the associated confusion over
appropriate leadership roles. Both citizens and officials report that interest groups dominated the process. They are not referring to special interests concerned with financial gain for themselves and their cronies. Rather, they are talking about various organized groups seeking to advance agendas that they consider to be of broad community benefit—most notably, groups concerned with economic development and environmental protection. They are drawing a distinction between interest group politics and individual involvement in the planning process.

Some officials are convinced that the process was inclusive and evenly administered despite interest group domination. Others were open about how certain actions on their part created an impression of special treatment of certain interest groups.

Part of the disagreement about whether the process was inclusive is in the assumption one makes about the meaning of the phrase public involvement. Of course, meetings were open and anyone was free to speak. But those—both officials and citizens—who feel that the Jackson/Teton County process was not inclusive point to the reality that those with more resources were able to shape the discussion of issues by retaining professional representation and using well-researched and presented data, graphics, and reports. As one participant observed,

The big stakeholders show up with maps, consultants, cost-benefit analyses or whatever they need to make their points. For the average citizen, to try and speak semi-intelligently in comparison is intimidating; so they often don’t say anything, if they show up at all.

An official similarly noted that

the average person is turned off by the process. They don’t think it matters anyway. And they’re not going to do it when they’re outnumbered by four- or five-to-one by special interest groups of either side.

This is not an uncommon situation, of course, and it is perhaps even to be expected in the case of Jackson/Teton County as they struggled to shape an appropriate process. Nevertheless, the difficulty of recognizing and dealing with it helped to erode the trust necessary for the very delicate planning task in which the community was engaged. This points to the third problem raised by the lack of public discussion about who decides what and under what conditions—the ad hoc nature of the process made it impossible to articulate clearly what community problems planning was supposed to ameliorate.

It was only poorly understood, or perhaps not understood at all, that not all private social issues are amenable to policy remedies. There was a hope that the planning process could somehow restore the community to its former self—a lively stew of wildly different personalities and economic means who, for the most part, felt they belonged to one another. Officials understood residents’ concerns over cultural change, but they were unable to identify the fatal gap in expectations. Changes in land use regulations could not salvage the loss of the special spirit of community that had existed for several generations.

The plan was supposed to be character based. It was supposed to determine what the elements were that make for strong community character. We were going to say, “These are the things we’re going to include in our plan, and we’re going to make sure that’s how we’re going to shape our community as it grows.” If you look at the actual plan . . . there’s very little that actually determines character.

However unrealistic people’s longings were, this unrealized hope had a great impact on their perceptions about the effectiveness of planning. Land use planning was the only tool local officials had to use against the growing sense of loss—not just loss of natural amenities and an appropriately scaled built environment but loss of social amenities and community identity.

I think, as far as the sense of community and the ability to maintain Jackson Hole as a quality place to live, it’s over. . . . There’s always going to be people replacing people and dynamics replacing dynamics, synergy replacing synergy; but it’s not going to be the same.

► Local Control: Whose Plans, Whose Decisions?

When people in a community bring different perspectives about an issue to the public table, expectations may not be reciprocally understood, and opinions and reactions from one side may not seem appropriate to the other. However, strong community networks, norms, and social trust—social capital—are supposed to facilitate deliberation and perhaps resolution of such differences in ways that strengthen the community. Social capital seemed to be strong in Jackson. People on all sides of the comprehensive planning process offered comments such as, “I . . . feel a real love and caring for [this place]. I think I have always hoped to help Jackson to grow well, and in a healthy way.” Thus, in spite of an extensive and deep sense of commitment to the community and a high level of attachment to place, an extended planning process involving large budgetary and emotional investments produced increased pessimism regarding the future of the community.

There was a critical secondary consequence as well. The strong social capital that characterizes Jackson/Teton County
is less accessible to future local government planning efforts. Many interviewees said that they would not participate in future planning efforts because the 1990-1994 process exhausted them emotionally without yielding hoped-for outcomes. And local officials and planning staff reported an increased difficulty in engaging citizens in a positive manner.

To summarize what happened, the responsible officials seemed not to realize the depth of concern in the community and began with a business-as-usual approach to the planning process. Then, faced with widespread demands for public involvement, they groped their way into a process that privileged organized interests over the voices of ordinary citizens. And finally, the community found itself engaged in a policy process—land use planning—that is not appropriate for addressing the issues they were most concerned about.

This is a community planning shortcoming that emerges repeatedly in the era of participation. The rapid change faced by Jackson/Teton County seems to be a hallmark of the current period. Communities large and small are faced with pressures from a variety of sources—growth, decline, economic and demographic shifts, and environmental problems. Additionally, struggles over planning processes and the dissatisfaction with the outcomes, such as those in Jackson/Teton County, are also commonplace today.

We think that there are two important overall lessons to be learned from this example.

Sense of citizen efficacy. The sense that there is no potential for an individual to influence decision making has an extremely corrosive effect on government’s ability to engage citizens in community problem solving. Planners’ and decision makers’ inability to assess the degree of inclusiveness and the reality of power imbalances among participants leads to mistaken judgments about the adequacy of planning processes. This is a common (but often unrecognized) phenomenon that proscribes the level of discussion necessary for authentic public involvement. The condition was evident in the Jackson/Teton County process and was one of the factors most influencing disillusionment with local government’s ability to plan for the greater good of the community.

Clarity on what is at issue. In the absence of a truly participatory process, officials and citizens in Jackson/Teton County assumed a great deal. An early and honest discussion about what land use regulations could and could not do might have removed some inappropriate pressure from the system and even generated parallel processes to name and deal with the issue of how social changes were affecting people’s sense of themselves in relation to their community. If sensitively handled, such an exchange could also have cast the issue in a more positive light by identifying social elements that are still intact and can be strengthened.

In the end, however, the struggle to find an appropriate process requires local officials to acknowledge on a deeper level what they are up against. The issues referred to above—growth in Jackson/Teton County but something else in another place—are matters of the heart. They may have technical elements, but from the viewpoint of local citizens, the issue is the emotional life of the community: what is this place, and what is my place in it?

The difficulty of incorporating the emotional life of a community into a planning process is substantial. Issues that are qualitative in nature cannot be easily analyzed, synthesized, or written into plans and policies. Moreover, public discussion of matters of the heart is considered embarrassing at best and unprofessional and irrelevant at worst in a professional planning culture that has impersonality and objectivity as key values.

The challenge to planning scholars in the age of participation, then, is to find approaches that strengthen and take advantage of social capital rather than ignore or—worse—weaken it. Just because the art of neighborliness does not lend itself easily to contemporary approaches, its meaning is no less important to residents trying to define a future for themselves, their families, and social networks.

What Is to Be Done?

Support for participatory planning is driven by the view that communities have a potential for social cohesion, that people can think of themselves as more than just taxpayers and service recipients—but as citizens with responsibility for the greater collective good. This idealistic view is regularly challenged in practice, of course. A 1990 National Civic League survey found that only 23 percent of respondents reported “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of faith in local institutions to solve community problems. A 1994 follow-up reported virtually the same response (National Civic League n.d.). And the public’s suspicion of government is reciprocated by public officials, who have an equally low opinion of citizens’ judgments on most policy issues (Bens 1994).

The Jackson Hole case suggests that this environment of mutual distrust and hostility is the product of clumsy attempts at participation and that the substrate of latent social capital—a potential for social cohesion—could be tapped into with more effective planning.

Properly understood, the communicative approach to planning offers a powerful tool for accessing a community’s latent social capital. However, its power is vitiated when the
communicative approach is defined merely as the ability to “hear and be heard, to bring diverse bits of information together, to interact successfully with a wide range of (people), and have a demonstrated ability to get the job done” (Ozawa and Seltzer 1999, 264). The essence of the communicative approach is to create conditions under which a genuine collaborative dialogue can occur around issues that are critical to the members of a community. This does not imply decisions that everyone agrees on, only that all viewpoints will be heard and all citizens will have an equal chance to participate in the decision. This explains the seeming disparity in the literature. The empirical studies that find communicative planning is the norm focus on planners and how they behave. The studies that find excluded groups focus on who planners are communicating with—or not.

The lessons of Jackson/Teton County for building a robust approach to participatory planning are the following:

**Be clear and open about what issues planning can and cannot deal with.** The first order of business for planners and local officials is to help citizens identify and articulate their aspirations regarding both critical issues and the process for addressing them. Then, officials, planners, and citizens can work together to make explicit which issues the process can realistically deal with and those that either need to be addressed through other efforts or cannot be resolved.

**Design a realistic process for dialogue.** Underestimating the significance of the process to the public is a common mistake. Those responsible for convening and managing the process need to be skilled at identifying potential and existing power imbalances and at reaching out to various publics to ensure all viewpoints in the community an equal chance to be heard and to participate in information sharing. They should budget for process management professionals as necessary.

**Be clear about who is making what decisions.** Citizens, elected officials, and professional staff often hold different assumptions about the extent to which citizens are to be a part of decision making. It is essential to establish at the beginning what are the public’s expectations regarding participation in generating alternatives and deciding on policy and to make explicit how far elected officials can legally accommodate shared decision making.

**Concluding remarks**

Professional staff and decision makers can make a significant difference in the quality of participation by using existing social networks and their associated norms of trust and reciprocity—social capital—to help citizens with different world-views discover and work toward their common interests. Such a process can help create broad ownership of outcomes and foster continued interest in civic participation. It also engages citizens in a way that encourages them to think and express themselves in terms of what is best for the community, rather than as representatives of interest groups assuming that all solutions are zero-sum. The potential of participation will be realized when we learn to harness social capital.

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