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## CONSTRAINTS ON THE COMMUNITY DECISION PROCESS\*

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Introduction

Most discussions of community planning and development have described it as a result (e.g., an increased level of economic activity which leads to a higher social welfare function and standard of living) or as a process (the way decisions should be made to achieve the result). The literature is, therefore, somewhat confusing since subsumed under the overall subject matter heading are such diverse topics as the economic feasibility of a manufacturing plant or social psychology applied to the power structure of the community recreation committee [2].

This paper should be identified as within the area which is concerned with the community decision process. Further, it is specifically directed to certain restrictions affecting the process as related to the provision of public services in the rural community. In this paper we discuss the institutional restrictions and monopoly powers which operate to narrow the scope of feasible alternatives and constrain the economic decision making function of community decision makers and government. Finally, we speak to the role of the Extension community resource development agent in such an environment. The article is intended to be provocative. It does not purport to be based on formal research but rather on personal experience and observation. It is more representative of small rural communities than larger municipalities.

The three major arguments concerning the constraints on decision making are these: (1) The increased federal and state funding of public goods investment has led to the establishment of regulations and procedures that must be followed in a substantial portion of community decision

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situations--these regulations and procedures limit the choice of alternatives and discourage innovative approaches. (2) The majority of large capital investment decisions in a community may really be made by the consulting firm retained by the community--the firm selects the alternative and the technology, and determines the cost of the alternative selected (the town is seldom given more than the veto power on proposals brought forth). (3) The consulting firm, as a profit making enterprise, has a vested interest in providing a study and set of proposals at a minimum cost to itself. In addition, the firm receives a major portion of its fee as a percentage of total project cost. It is not unreasonable to believe that these factors will lead to standardization of technology and design and to the adoption of this standard design in as many situations as possible. In rational self-interest, it is difficult to conceive of the firm seeking to minimize total project cost or to search for innovative alternatives.

#### Institutional and Monopolistic Constraints on Community Decision Making

Let us begin with problem recognition and identification. A large proportion of the major community public service problems today are identified by outside agencies.<sup>1/</sup> In too many cases, no action is taken in the local community until--or unless--an agency at a higher level of government forces it. For example, the inadequacy of wastewater treatment facilities is identified by water pollution control agencies of the state or federal government. The need for additional water supply is often identified by fire underwriters or the State Fire Marshall. School adequacy is a concern of the State Department of Education. These regulatory and enforcement bodies have certain standards that they monitor on a regular basis, and until these limits are reached, no action need be taken. However, when violation or nonconformance occurs, action must be taken to correct the situation--generally within specified time limits. The community now has a problem and is given a time constraint for solution.<sup>2/</sup>

In nearly every project involving sizable capital expenditures (water, sewage, schools, public recreation facilities), federal or state assistance programs become relevant. Since such assistance is often of substantial magnitude, it becomes irrational not to apply for and accept such funding. However, to be eligible, there are procedural guidelines

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<sup>1/</sup> Wireman [5], and Jones and Gessaman [1], are among the few sources in the literature that recognize the constraints imposed by non-local agencies.

<sup>2/</sup> This situation admittedly describes the extreme situation. This is not to say that some citizens may not have been aware of problems and attempting to begin efforts directed at solution.



which must be followed that appear to severely constrain the community decision [3]. Let us briefly sketch the nature of one such community project.

Odorberg has just been informed that its continuing pollution of the Cruddy River will no longer be tolerated. In fact, it must go on an "implementation schedule" or face fines which are set at an intolerable level. The first item on the implementation schedule orders that the town shall retain the services of a professional engineering (consulting) firm which shall proceed to study the situation and design a treatment facility that will remedy the situation and which will satisfy certain water pollution regulations as prescribed by law.<sup>3/</sup>

Once the consulting firm is selected, the community is not unlike a set of buyers facing a single seller; and, the consulting firm usually exercises its monopolistic powers. The consultants move on to the scene and prepare a technical study which, except for changes in parameters and names, is virtually identical to several others that they have done for other communities. The format used is one that has proven satisfactory to regulatory and granting agencies.

On the basis of the study of the situation, the consultants make their report along with a preliminary recommendation of the course of action to be taken. The town fathers, who are likely to be lay persons, tend to accept the report and give the go-ahead to prepare the full-scale plan for a new wastewater treatment facility. The consultants then proceed to develop plans for a standardized facility which will meet the requirements of the regulatory agency with some future span of adequacy.

Now, where has local decision making come into this situation? It is true that the citizens and town officials are given an opportunity to react to plans at several stages along the way. It is also true that at every point in the process, alternatives are mentioned when the local government officials or the townspeople receive the consultants report. However, all but one of those alternatives are given short shrift and that one is presented as the only feasible alternative. Thus, the consultants have evaluated the alternatives and have confronted the decision makers with a yes or no decision. At every step in the process, the same thing happens. When the final decision is to be made on the bond issue and authorization, the townspeople are again given only the veto power.

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<sup>3/</sup> The sequence described is representative of New England town government and may not exactly represent the situation in other parts of the country. It is presented in extreme to illustrate the point.

It may be argued that the opportunity exists for citizen input at all stages in the process since public hearings are usually specified on the proposals being considered. However, this means of obtaining citizen participation meets with limited success for the following reasons.<sup>4/</sup>

- (1) Hearings are typically poorly attended and there is a tendency for those in favor of the proposal to adopt a complacent attitude and stay home, while those opposed are more likely to attend the hearing.
- (2) Hearings are frequently dominated by a few people who have special or vested interests in the proposal. For example, those people with homes adjacent to the proposed location of a new sewer plant will object to that location because of the potential effect on their property values. A developer may support the expansion of the water system because it may make his property more marketable.
- (3) Boards tend to place more weight on statements placed in the record at public hearings than on general community sentiment (see Point 1 above).

#### Role of the Community Development Agent

We have attempted to describe community decision making when "exogenous" agencies and "monopolistic" firms constrain the character and range of choices. The obvious question at this point is, "How can community development agents assist communities in circumventing these constraints and forces?"

A beginning point is to recognize that these constraints and forces do exist. We are not persuaded (again from observation) that many community development personnel at the county or regional level perceive this problem. If they do, it may explain the "superficiality" of much of the work that is done in community development extension. In large part the intent of this paper has been to focus upon these constraints so that community development Extension workers see it explicitly and are able to relate it through the Extension-education process to their client-communities. Only when the problem is explicitly recognized is there a hope for a solution.

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<sup>4/</sup> These statements are based on the senior author's (and wife's) experiences in local government, including service on town planning boards, zoning board of appeals, permanent building committee, town recreation committee, long-range planning committee, and regional school committee.

The second step toward a solution is for the community development agent to work with planning boards within the community. A major purpose of such boards is to identify the major problems facing the community and to reflect as well as possible the community's viewpoint. The Extension person can bring to this board more than "facts and figures". He/she can bring them expertise and access to expertise available at the land grant college. He/she can bring education on methodological alternatives and community involvement processes. Through methods such as community surveys and group techniques, the planning board would be able to provide some self-direction as to the setting of priorities on problems that face the community. As such, the community has an opportunity to select it's own direction for development and capital expenditures. In addition, an explicit statement of priority problems provides the community with specific information with which to counteract "exogenous" constraints that may be imposed by environmental agencies.

It is interesting and unfortunate that many people regard government regulations and/or guidelines as absolute [3]. In fact, unless specifically set forth in the relevant federal or state laws, many of the provisions in regulations are flexible [3]. Community officials should be aware of this fact and it could be part of the community development agent's role to impart this knowledge and attempt to compile a backlog of instances of deviation from strict interpretations. Thus, the community armed with a knowledge of their own needs and priorities, and with full comprehension of the meaning and potential flexibility of regulation, is better able to deal with the constraints imposed by exogenous governmental forces.

Third, the community development agent can educate the community at large, or perhaps the planning board, on the sources of information that are available from other than consulting firms. For example, if a new sewage treatment plant is imposed upon the community, the planning board or town board may ask for the assistance of the community development agent to find the best non-consulting firm sources of information on sewage treatment plants. While the community development agent may not have the personal expertise on sewage treatment plants, he/she should have available a list of knowledgeable sources. For example, he/she may talk to a civil engineer who might refer to a document prepared by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency titled, "A Guide to the Selection of Cost Effective Wastewater Treatment Systems" [4]. This particular document contains a chart which shows the major sewage treatment processes that could be considered to meet different effluent quality requirements. Perhaps more significant might be a "mini-course" in sewage treatment arranged by the community development agent. The Extension person has available many resource people at the University who



can provide this knowledge.<sup>5/</sup> With this kind of information the planning board has essentially done their homework and can more intelligently consider a contract with a consulting firm. In the contract they would specify the kinds of alternatives that should be considered for the specific site or project in question. Thus, in doing their homework, they are able to write a more detailed, and hence, effective contract in order to meet the requirements of the law. Consulting firms also sometimes assume the role of searching for, and facilitating grants or other assistance, to be used. With a new program called FAPRS (Federal Assistance Programs Retrieval Systems) the community board itself may request a search of 600 federal programs to identify the characteristics of assistance available for a particular type of community program. The community development agent may not only assist in initiating such a request but may help in evaluating alternatives.

The above are two examples of the type of information a community development agent may secure for client-communities. Information from governmental agencies abound. Every community development agent should compile and maintain a list of governmental agencies and the type of information they maintain.

### Conclusions

The authors have described a problem of constraints on community development decisions because they believe it is a sufficiently important problem that it should be explicitly recognized. The authors would be the first to admit that the solutions offered in terms of the role of the community development agent relative to these constraints are weak. But, they offer these suggestions in order to stimulate discussion.

It appears to be difficult to circumvent the "exogenous" constraints imposed by governmental agencies. Typically, to ignore such constraints either constitutes a violation of law or a loss of governmental funds. Those imposed at the federal or state level are especially difficult to circumvent. At the local level may be somewhat easier to get around because of the smaller scale of the agencies. It is at the local level that priorities set by communities may be most effective in counteracting "exogenous" constraints. On the other hand, the authors believe that the community development agent, in providing an education program

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<sup>5/</sup> A statewide conference or workshop would probably not be effective because of the small number of communities confronted with such a problem at a given time. However, it is not unreasonable to conceive of designing a mini-course and making it available at a nominal fee to any community needing such assistance.

has the ability to counteract some of the monopolistic powers of consulting firms. By having more and better information, communities are able to write more detailed contracts with consultants.

In conclusion, the authors believe that the constraints discussed are real, are important, should be explicitly recognized, and trust that discussion will ensue which will shed light upon the problem.

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