

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND AN ELECTED OFFICIAL'S VIEWPOINT

ARTHUR J. HOLLAND

Mayor

City of Trenton, New Jersey

I thought I would briefly review the chronology of formal citizen participation in prominent public programs. The programs start with public housing, which has not had and does not now have any provision for citizen participation. The housing authority decides to put up a project and does it. There is increasing demand on the part of tenants in those projects for participation either as members of the authority or as advisors to it.

Then came urban renewal, which called for an urban renewal advisory committee. Of course, that was a built-in requirement for citizen participation. The Economic Opportunity Act was being implemented based on 2 schools of thought: one, keep it in city hall; and the other, have a nonprofit corporation, a partnership between government and the public. We had the latter in our city, and it worked very well. For the first time, there was mass citizen involvement, especially of the nonwhite community.

Then, of course, the ultimate came, as far as citizen participation is concerned: model cities. In 1966, when I was a consultant with the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development my last assignment was to advise on this new city demonstration program under the Metropolitan Development Act of 1966. They decided not to call it the Demonstration Cities Program because the demonstrations were breaking out at the time, and they did not want the people to be confused or have the program not get off the ground. So they called it the Model Cities Program, and there is still no formal provision for that terminology. At any rate, in the Model Cities Program, at least in Trenton, there is provision for a mutual veto. In other words, the citizens have the same power as the government in the model neighborhood—except that, to be honest about it, because the checks are written at city hall, the government still does ultimately have the final say if there is an impasse.

I was a big citizen participation man when I was in office before, but I changed somewhat after I came back because I saw that the citizens were so strong that they were, in effect, demanding the kind of power that comes—all things being equal—with the vote. In other words, I think we must admit that, however strong the partnership, if there is an impasse, then obviously the person who is subjected to the electorate is entitled to have some balance of power. Of course, if the elected official does not exercise that balance of power properly, then those same citizens can seek redress at the next election.

The citizens appreciate this power, so much so that just last week the Model Cities Policy Committee, which is the highest level committee for citizens, voted to use limited funds (we have been cut back by 45 percent) for planning staff rather than for programs, the real bread-and-butter matters out in the neighborhoods. In effect black leaders were saying, "We will let community development workers go rather than the higher paid community planner, physical planner, social planner." I agree with that only because I think that, until it is closed out, the Model Cities Program should be protected as far as its integrity as an experiment is concerned. Unless there is this balanced partnership, this equal partnership between city demonstration agencies and the Model Cities Policy Committee, then you cannot have a true experiment. The citizens realize that, if the Delaware Valley Transportation Committee is going to compete with the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission, they have to have staff resources.

Until recently, the attitude of the average highway engineer and transportation man was to locate highways "as the crow flies," even though that might mean some big trees or houses would be taken. That notion took a lot of confidence and optimism. Of course, there was no legal prohibition to it, so it worked out all right.

Then along came the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, and that created an altogether different situation. I can give you a case study of NJ-29, the road that runs along the river to the rear of our state capitol building. About 20 years ago, it was decided that the water power, which ran parallel to the river, was needed as an east-west highway base. There was a fight between the citizens who lived along this beautiful area and the locally elected officials, and the local officials did explore alternates. But this was really the only route, so they built it. The mayor lost some votes from the districts along that route, but no one made any attempt to hold up construction. About 10 years later, and about 10 years ago, the next section was to be constructed. That section was to the rear of the state capitol building; no residences were involved, and no environmental impact study was required. I was mayor at the time this took place. The major question regarded negotiation between the local government and the state government as to the price of the land, and we were able to get \$60 thousand an acre for it. Twenty years earlier the city had turned over the water power for a dollar.

We are now planning a third section of NJ-29, which involves a densely populated white area. About 7 years ago, there was a public hearing, and, as a result of that public hearing, the direction of the road was changed because it would have created what in effect would have been a Chinese wall.

About 1½ years ago the requirements of the Environmental Protection Agency had to be implemented. We had negotiated with the New Jersey Department of Transportation a "dream" arrangement for the first time in history. We were getting not only dollars for the land but also replacement for a lot of recreational area that unfortunately had to be taken. The new recreational facilities would be superior to the ones that would be taken along the right-of-way. But trees would still have to be cut, and this is the last natural area along the river.

After we had negotiated the dream arrangement, the citizens found out that there was no environmental impact study; we had forgotten about it, and apparently the federal government had forgotten about it. We are now awaiting the report on that study. During this period, we have had several meetings with local officials, state officials, and citizens. The citizens enlisted the aid of the student workshop at Princeton University. In their study of how to preserve the environment, the students came up with another route. When the detailed designs were completed, we had another meeting. As it turned out, the student engineers did not really do a sufficient job of documentation, and the pros were really right. But even so, the situation was ambiguous again, and the project was slowed down.

The basic problem in these meetings is that the citizen sees each stretch of road in terms of his neighborhood, and the officials and planners see it as one part of a regional plan. In retrospect, I think that, if we would start at the bottom rather than at the top, we could save an awful lot of time. If a certain route must be taken, then it is going to be taken a lot sooner if the people who have to be persuaded that it is the only route are brought into the discussions at the very beginning. I think thereafter that it is important to have advisory committees not only at the local level but at the national level, at the state level, at the regional level, and at the county level.

For example, Mercer County, in which Trenton is the county seat, announced a plan for a new railroad station between Princeton and Trenton. We did not know about it until it was announced. We reacted like citizens; I can tell you that! Perhaps because of the political power that a city has and can bring to the attention of elected county officials, that plan will be changed, but that is not the basis on which a plan should be changed. Perhaps because of the way they did it, even though it was a valid suggestion, they will never get a reasonable hearing from us because we resent the fact that they sprang it on us.

In the city, we have recently announced through our planning board a plan for citizen involvement. We have task forces on transportation, on housing, on the environment, and on several other areas. The task forces are composed of people from everywhere in the city. They research projects in their areas of interest and report to the board so that, when the board adopts a plan, it can be sure that the plan has already had broad exposure before it goes to public hearing.

The role of a mayor is a community relations leader, a group relations leader, a race relations leader, a human relations specialist. We try to anticipate problems and prepare for them by going about this comprehensive involvement process. That kind of attitude, I think, if present at all levels, is most likely to ensure that what needs to be done not only will get done but will get done in the shortest possible time.

INFORMAL DISCUSSION

PARSONS: How do you select personnel for advisory committees?

HOLLAND: I think you have to retain your independence as an appointing authority. It is easy to let this be taken from you by letting different organizations assume that they have the right to determine which ethnic person will be on the various committees. Also, I think you have to have technically informed people and lay people. I do not think there is any one formula; you have to play it by ear. It is important for the mayor or any appointing authority to be involved to the extent he can.

ROLLET: With all due respect, I think what we have lost sight of is the fact that citizens need not just be put on advisory committees but have the kind of expertise and knowledge so that they can be put into decision-making committees and decision-making situations. That model cities program you talked about in which they had a double veto, in which the city government and the public could veto, should be extended. That is not something that we should try to modify with a strong mayor, but something we should encourage with strong citizens.

HOLLAND: Trenton was the first city in the nation to have members on the decision-making board elected by the people. Philadelphia did it some months later and got national publicity, but it really started in Trenton. So I agree with you. However, if an impasse is reached and it is impossible for one side to prove to the other that it is right, somebody has to make a decision. I think that responsibility clearly lies with the elected officials. The alternative is a kind of anarchy.

ROLLET: Or a democracy.

HOLLAND: We are a representative government.

RAIDER: As a citizen, I will come to the defense of a past fellow citizen. I think Mayor Holland has indicated that he is one of the few mayors that I know of who has an open-door policy where anybody can call him without having to make an announcement of who they are and what they are asking for. I think this is a credit to him for this type of citizen participation.

HOLLAND: It is true that we have a completely open-door policy. Anyone can walk into the mayor's office. There is no such thing as a closed meeting. I have town meetings in each ward of the city periodically. My phone at home is in the book. Whether I agree with them or not, at least the citizens can reach me. Every now and then I force myself to recall my citizen days when Leon Raider and I were fighting Walter Sullivan.

BENSTOCK: If citizens want to be notified of what your open meetings are, can they get notification, and have you developed a procedure for that?

HOLLAND: The meeting time to me is common knowledge. The last Thursday night of each month is "Meet the Mayor Night." We announce to the schools and so on when we have town meetings, so the public knows about that. Then we have special meetings; for example, when Governor Cahill proposed a tax reform, we had meetings in each of the 4 wards.

One of my reasons for keeping my phone number listed in the book is to build in responsiveness on the part of officials. The department directors and other key officials who might not want to be responsive when citizens call them know that the citizen can go over their heads to the mayor's home. When anybody calls the mayor's office, the staff are forbidden to ask who is calling; so I do not even know who is on the phone when I answer. The whole idea is to inspire confidence in the public that there is open government.

But let me say that, in recent years because of the war on poverty and because of the Model Cities Program, I found the citizen side was outweighing the government side. I think that is as wrong as the government side dominating the citizen side. Ultimately you get to the point where you have to say, all things being equal, that the decision lies with the elected official who is put in office after all by the people who can replace him by recall, if it is important enough at the moment, or at the next regular election.

BENSTOCK: The place decisions are made means to none of us a town meeting or forum or hearing.

HOLLAND: Keep in mind that we have a city government that is modeled after federal and state governments. Ours is the executive branch where we make administrative decisions all the time. We can only recommend policy to the governing body, the city council, which makes the basic planning and zoning decisions. The planning board appointed by the mayor recommends to the city council whether a street shall be closed off or not.

ANDERSON: Do you have an opinion on the wisdom of having closed legislative meetings by legislative bodies? That is the practice of a number of city councils and state legislatures.

HOLLAND: I do not know how high you can carry that policy. We have 106,000 people. I think, to the extent that you can, you should always have public meetings. The only things we have kept off the record were real estate matters that are in process because of the possible effect on price were it to be announced that the city was negotiating to acquire the land. Also, we kept secret the site of the mass grave should there be an atomic attack, a decision that was made at the height of the civil defense program. Why worry citizens by letting them know they are living next to the mass grave site. But, in general, I think the public's business should be public. At the federal level, obviously there have to be certain matters, especially of a military nature, that are secret. If I were president, I do not think that I could have anyone walk into my office at any time. We also have a policy with the press. If a reporter walks in, we say, "This is off the record." I have never had that deliberately violated.

ANDERSON: I am referring to a situation in which a rules committee votes whether to permit a bill to come to the floor for a vote. That committee meets in secrecy and the vote is never published. These are the kinds of activities by elected officials, I think, that create what might be overreaction by citizen groups once they get a chance at the veto.

HOLLAND: You made a very good point earlier when you said that it depends on whether people think that a matter is being handled properly and in the public interest. If they think that it is, then they do not care about going to the meeting. I think that is the key and is the type of thing I had in mind when I talked about the open door we try to maintain. If people have confidence that things are not being withheld from them, they will not be that concerned to come in. Except for the few matters I mentioned, I do not think there should be anything private. It is public business. Also there is a

tremendous advantage to the elected official; it is unlikely that anything really wrong can take place in that kind of atmosphere.

PARSONS: Have you had in the Trenton area various citizens' groups that have requested participation in transportation decision-making in the initial planning?

HOLLAND: They do not have to do so now because of the task-force approach we have. We will make sure that every section of the city, whether it is affected in the near or distant future by transportation projects, will be included in any discussions automatically. The word will automatically get out to them. This is what the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission does regionally.

CARSON: If I write to you, will you give me the names of these citizens' groups whom you have asked to participate in your task forces?

HOLLAND: At the public meeting last week, we invited everyone who came to the meeting to sign up for a task force. We are asking the public per se to become involved. I think if we need any strengthening of committees, we probably would go to recognized citizen organizations like the NAACP or the South Ward Civic Association.

CARSON: Do they sign up or apply for certain ones?

HOLLAND: They can serve on more than one if they want. Here is the interesting part: Each planning board member will be assigned to a task force and may be assigned to more than one. So individual planning board members will meet with the citizens.