Citizen Participation in Decision Making: Is It Worth the Effort?

It is widely argued that increased community participation in government decision making produces many important benefits. Dissent is rare: It is difficult to envision anything but positive outcomes from citizens joining the policy process, collaborating with others and reaching consensus to bring about positive social and environmental change. This article, motivated by contextual problems encountered in a participatory watershed management initiative, reviews the citizen-participation literature and analyzes key considerations in determining whether community participation is an effective policy-making tool. We list conditions under which community participation may be costly and ineffective and when it can thrive and produce the greatest gains in effective citizen governance. From the detritus of an unsuccessful citizen-participation effort, we arrive at a more informed approach to guide policy makers in choosing a decision-making process that is appropriate for a community’s particular needs.

Introduction

"CBEP (Community-Based Environmental Protection) is designed to maximize the use of scarce resources, encourage local support, and consider the economic well-being of communities."

—Environmental Protection Agency (1996)

Notwithstanding the ambiguous mention of using scarce resources, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) should be commended for its efforts to incorporate more citizen involvement into environmental protection programs (Fiorino 2000). With improved community relations as a motivating goal, the EPA pushed for national and regional enhancements in environmental decision making throughout the latter half of the 1990s. This ambitious effort has not been limited to the EPA, nor to environmental management. At all levels of government, citizen-participation programs have been launched since the 1950s (Day 1997), with the underlying assumption that if citizens become actively involved as participants in their democracy, the governance that emerges from this process will be more democratic and more effective.

Arguments for enhanced citizen participation often rest on the merits of the process and the belief that an engaged citizenry is better than a passive citizenry (King, Feltey, and Susel 1998; Putnam 1995; Aronstein 1969). With citizen participation, formulated policies might be more realistically grounded in citizen preferences, the public might become more sympathetic evaluators of the tough decisions that government administrators have to make, and the improved support from the public might create a less divisive, combative populace to govern and regulate. However, incorporating citizen input into agency decision-making...
ing is not a costless process. This article articulates not just the potential benefits, but also the social and economic costs of community participation, so that policy makers may better predict the usefulness of citizen participation initiatives. The first article explores the potentially wide-ranging benefits of enhanced community participation. Drawbacks to community participation are evaluated next, including a brief discussion of the relative costs of citizen participation versus representative decision making. We then attempt to incorporate the public participation into a management program for a degraded urban watershed, and note the characteristics that made this project unusually challenging. We highlight place-based changes in decision-making that may predict the success or failure of community participation programs. In effect, we take a step back from the "how to" literature to determine whether to at all.

The Advantages of Citizen Participation
Citizen participation in public affairs "seems to hold a sacramental role in U.S. political culture" (Day 1971, 1). The enthusiasm for incorporating citizens into democratic decision making is not limited to the United States: Many other countries have extensive initiatives in place that involve citizens in the governing process (Nyen 2002; Trebitz 2002; Patashnik and Post 2001; OECD 2001). A central tenant of the enthusiasm accorded to citizen participation is the belief that citizen involvement in a Jeffersonian democracy will produce more public-preference decision making on the part of administrators and a better appreciation of the larger community among the public (Stivers 1990; Oldfield 1990; Box 1998). King and Silvers (1999) suggest that improved citizens' participation could stem the deterioration of public trust evidenced by widespread hostility toward government entities and the 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Indeed, the debate swirling around citizen participation is no longer representative government versus citizen participation, but what type of citizen-participation process is best (Konisky and Moe 1995)?

The arguments in favor of enhancing citizen participation frequently focus on the benefits of the process itself. Nelson and Wright (1995), for example, emphasize the participation process as a transformative tool for social change. In their view, citizen involvement is intended to elicit better decisions, and thus more efficiency benefits to the rest of society (Beierle 1999; Thomas 1995). Thus, we have two tiers of benefits to consider (process and outcome) and two beneficiaries (government and citizens) in evaluating the effectiveness of the citizen-participation process (table 1).

Table 1: Advantages of Citizen Participation in Government Decision Making

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision process</th>
<th>Advantages to citizen participants</th>
<th>Advantages to government</th>
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<tr>
<td>Education (learn from and inform government representatives)</td>
<td>Persuade and enlighten government</td>
<td>Gain legitimacy of decisions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Persuade citizens; build trust and rocky anxiety or hostility</td>
<td>Build strategic alliances</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gain legitimacy of decisions</td>
<td>Break gridlock; achieve outcomes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Break gridlock; achieve outcomes</td>
<td>Gain some control over policy process</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain some control over policy process</td>
<td>Better policy and implementation decisions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Better policy and implementation decisions</td>
<td>Avoid litigation costs</td>
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Education
An in-depth citizen-participation process can help to transcend the barriers to effective policy created by our sound-bite media culture. Informed and involved citizens become citizen-experts, understanding technically difficult situations and seeing holistic, communitywide solutions. Pateman (1970), Sabatier (1988), and Blackburn and Bruce (1995) all stress the educational benefits of citizen participation. Administrators are able to explain their reasons for pursuing particular programs so that they can be more participatory and participatory to the public. It is assumed that more participants with a more sophisticated level of technical and social understanding will yield better policy decisions, and thus better social and environmental outcomes: "We envision that these relationships established with regional and community organizations will bring about a better understanding of environmental problems" (EPA 1996, 1).

Administrators also benefit from receiving education on specific community groups' positions. The administrators, through regular contact with citizens, might otherwise not be engaged in the policy process, learn which policies are likely to be explosively unpopular and how to avoid such policy failures. A policy that is well grounded in citizen perspectives might be implemented in a smoother, less costly fashion because the public is more cooperative when the policy is implemented (Thomas 1995; Vroom and Jago 1988).

Political Susaution
What motivated government entities to abdicate part of their decision making responsibilities to participatory groups may not have been a sincere desire to improve policy outcomes by becoming better educated about community preferences. Indeed, the more powerful motivating factor may be the prospect of a more cooperative public. Thomas explains, "More often than not, the imperatives for public impovement comes from a need to obtain acceptance as a prerequisite to successful implementation" (1995, 113).

Howard, Lipsky, and Marshall (1994) illustrate this in the historical context of urban politics, where federal and local policy established and "outlawed" citizen participation in response to the urban protest movement of the 1960s. It is certainly an improvement in public affairs when government administrators incorporate the question, how might the public react?, into their decision making. However, requiring participation programs primarily serve a marketing purpose, where the participation process consists of government representatives guiding citizens toward decisions the administrator would have made in the first place. Rourke provides an extreme example of a bureaucracy reluctant to concede control: "The truth of the matter is that agencies in the field of national security affairs give a good deal of lip service to the idea of consulting with the public, but in practice this consultation commonly concerns groups of citizens together so that they can be indoctrinated with the official point of view" (1984, 54). Whether the government truly collaborates with citizens, or whether it merely works to win over citizen sentiment, a key assumption of successful political susaution is fidelity of citizen participants. If they are influential (not necessarily elite) community members, their enthusiasm for the policy will spread throughout the community and opposition will be diffused (Howell, Olsen, and Olsen 1987).

Empowerment
Political persuasion works in the opposite direction as well. Community activists may have regular contact with key government decision makers and can persuasively convery their views in a nonconfrontational atmosphere. Applegate explains how citizen advisory boards allow an "opportunity to meet face to face with and personally persuade decisionmakers" (1998, 923), and others advocate participation as a way of teaching otherwise powerless citizens to interact with other groups in society, gaining legitimacy as political players (Fox 1996; Valadez 2001). Conversely, the history of urban citizen participation described by Howard, Lipsky, and Marshall (1994) suggests the routinization of citizen participation in the 1970s and 1980s may have mollified an angry urban public to such an extent that it diffused the pressure to reform.

Breaking Gridlock
In some communities, traditional political discourse can disintegrate into obstreperous maneuvers, bringing decision making to a halt. Weeks (2000) details a successful deliberative democracy project that forced recalcitrant city council members to implement painful budget cuts with the mandate of hundreds of citizens from workshops and survey responses. In such cases, a participatory initiative can vastly improve social outcomes, as balanced input from citizens participates in problem identification and find solutions to previously intractable problems (Reich 1990).

Government agencies can obtain important political support to change directions: "By opening the process to meaningful public input, the department (of energy) is empowered to make decisions that could never make unilaterally (Applegate 1998, 931).

Avoiding Litigation Costs
Often, public participation is assumed to be cost-effective because it reduces the probability of litigation (Randolph and Bauer 1999). O'Leary et al. note the expense of participatory processes, but they explain, "Managers should expect stalled negotiations, breakdowns in trust, and outcomes into which they will not buy. Instead, disgruntled stakeholders may walk out of the process or still go to court over the outcome. But compare these possibilities to the higher potential of lengthy litiga tion delays should an organization eschew meaningful stakeholder participation altogether" (1999, 139). However, Cragin (1997) finds that collaborative efforts in regulatory negotiations did not result in less litigation, and true litigation rates may have been exaggerated.

Environmental Management
Participatory structures such as citizen advisory boards were adopted in the 1980s and 1990s to improve upon the one-way flow of information in public hearings on proposed environmental policies. The review and comment methodology—decide on the policy, then hold a public meeting and turn the public in a public hearing—is a poor vehicular vehicle for complex topics, not to mention grossly inadequate as a persuasion tool, though it is still used extensively (Beierle 1999). In some areas of the rural West, actions on the part of environmental leaders. Such events are driven by the politics of federal paternalism, and without being aware of the stirrings of new "Sagebrush Rebellion..." (2000, 57). In this milieu, a small community can stage a media-friendly protest event and tug on the president's ear. Such events are precious for the political mill, and even national-level environmental protection funding may be jeopardized in response. Rourke describes how intense media attention can derail an agency's well-intended programs: "Any sudden expansion in the public that takes its interest in activities may
The Disadvantages of Citizen Participation

The following sections and table 2 describe certain problems of citizen-participation processes that may be overcome by effective structuring, if resources permit. Other problems are contextual, suggesting that some communities are poor candidates for citizen-participation initiatives, and measurable outcomes may be better achieved with other decision-making methods.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Disadvantages of Citizen Participation in Government Decision Making</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decision process</td>
<td>Disadvantages to citizen participants</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time consuming (even dull)</td>
<td>Time consuming</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hassles if decision is ignored</td>
<td>Caustic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Worse policy decision if heavily influenced by opposing interest groups</td>
<td>Use of decision-making control</td>
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<tr>
<td>Possibility of bad decision that is politically impossible to ignore</td>
<td>Curly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>May be naive</td>
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The Difficulty of Diffusing Citizen Goodwill

Wining the hearts and minds of citizens by meeting with them regularly and ultimately gaining their trust may not always be as easy as representing business may be the only way for environmental regulators to promote new policies in communities where antigovernment sentiment runs high. Ostrom (1989) suggests collabora- tive decision making works best when the group is small and homogeneous, which is most likely found in rural communities. In larger communities, however, expecting 10 or 20 citizen representatives to turn around popular opinion may be naive. The citizen participants comprise a tiny portrait of the population, and unless they are known to rep- resent a constituency, there are no guarantees that each citizen participant is influential in his or her community.

Cost

Many discussions of the value of public participation leave out a large barrier—cost. Although comparative costs have not been subject to close scrutiny, the low end of the per-decision cost of citizen-participation groups is arguably more expensive than the decision making of a single agency administrator, even if the citizen participants’ time is ignored. A single administrator, technically trained and politically astute enough to recognize the probable consequences of his or her decision, may come to the same decision that the community group chose—and it may take him or her one month of work, one day, or even just one sentinel consideration. Lawrence and Deagin (2001) state that the heavy time commitments that citizen-participation processes require, and Echeverria (2001) describes a collaborative process that is deliberately designed to slow down environmental decision making to favor the status quo.

Complicity

Much has been written about public alienation from the public affairs process (Berman 1997), and the literature usually assumes that if only the right vehicle for empowerment and engagement were offered, citizens would lose their cynicism toward government and actively support environmental policy. However, there is growing knowledge that working out policy decisions and implementing details over a protracted series of meetings is an activity that most citizens prefer to avoid. Where communities are complacent, there is a strong argument for top-down administration simply on the grounds of efficiency. Lawrence and Deagin (2001) allude to this in their study of public participation methods, suggesting that in cases in which the public is likely to accept the mandate of an agency decision maker, a participatory process is not neces- sary. Williams et al. (2001) show that, although members of the public indicated intent to participate, very few (less than 1 percent in their study) followed up by phoning for more information. Most often, people who indicated a desire to participate preferred to pay taxes to hire an assis- tive public administrator to do the decision making rather than personally allocate the time to get involved in the governing process.

Representation

Because citizen participants are not paid for their time, committees may be dominated by strongly partisan par- ticipants whose livelihood or values are strongly affected by the decisions being made, or by those who live com- fortable enough to allow them to participate regularly. Smith and McDonough (2001, 245) provide distressing evidence from their study of 53 focus groups that citizen participants recognized inequality in the representation and presented what they saw as an unfair public participation process. Citizens were not at all satisfied with the process: “...some of the meetings I quit going to because they were loaded and they were orchestrated, so why attend when you knew the outcome was gonna be what they wanted...” Smith and McDonough (2001, 253) report that “fear for his or her business and government agency interests, are paid for their time devoted to the initiative. Curry criticizes citizen-participation processes for allowing special-interest views to dominate the decision-making process. “A member of aspiring Chi- nese and government agency interests, are paid for their time devoted to the initiative. Curry criticizes citizen-participation processes for allowing special-interest views to dominate the decision-making process. “A member of aspiring Chi-
Inadequate representation of environmental interests, will produce authoritative decisions that are unduly influenced by local economic interests (Echeverria 2001). Britell asks, "Where will the path that replaces effective administration and oversight of our laws with schmoozy consensus groups and glib partnerships eventually lead us?" (1997, 7). Because these decisions were made by a citizen committee, government representatives—including environmental regulatory agencies—may find it politically impossible to do otherwise. The mandate of a citizen planning group can be a powerful tool to break political gridlock, the mandate is feared for its potential to ratify selfish decisions that favor the most powerful or persuasive members of the collaborative group rather than the wider public (Kemey 2000).

Persistent Selfishness

Implicit in some of the citizen-participation literature is a belief that participatory decision making will automatically generate a new, more altruistic concern for others. Others, however, see locally based decision making as an opportunity to influence policy for personal gain. Ecomonists are widely chastised (Barber 1984; deLeon and Denhardt 2000). "Ecomonomic man" is a self-interested, nonmoral, self-centered, self-seeking, and self-protecting force (Levy 1995). Repugnant as economic man appears to some theorists, it would be shortsighted to ignore the persistence of self-interest—that is, friendship and persuasion may still provide no match for personal or financial incentives.

Participatory Watershed Planning in a Difficult Setting

Omaha seemed to have all the environmental elements to suggest potential gains from a multijurisdictional, participatory watershed management process. The Papillion Creek system (known regionally as the "Papio"), which originates in farmland north and west of Omaha, gathers pollutants from agriculture and urban runoff before it joins with the Missouri River southeast of the city. The watershed covers three counties with a combined population of 605,000. Because of extensive flooding in the past and land-use pressures, Papillion Creek has been blackened and channelized in many areas. What remains is a creek system whose channels are expensive to maintain, but do prevent most flooding. The costs of channelization include not only maintenance, but also poor water quality, degraded aquatic and streamside habitat, and the aesthetic drawback of a barren, grassy ditch running through the city. Upstream rural citizens have a history of voting down projects that could benefit urban Omaha, and prior proposals to build dams for flood control in Omaha have been defeated. Development accelerated in the 1990s virtually without restrictions as many homes and businesses were routinely built near the creek in areas that would have flooded years before.

The researchers did gather data on the potential for using multi-criteria decision-making methods; however, the data were from a participant group primarily composed of conscientious homeowners rather than a diverse mix of group of stakeholders. For the main forum convened for the purpose of evaluating the multi-criteria decision-making methods, mailings and phone calls to a list of respondents resulted in 15 citizen representatives (landowners, recreating users of the creek, etc.) who promised to attend the forum. However, only one citizen representative showed up for the forum. The researchers and agency representatives felt the public participation element of the study was a disappointment and declined to hold subsequent forums (although additional and likewise unsuccessful attempts were made to involve a working group of development industry representatives). Other elements of the study—such as gathering data, mapping potential environmental effects from various management alternatives, and gathering agency representatives from a variety of jurisdictions and agencies—were considered successful. The lack of citizen participation in the Papillion Creek project is likely due to the following:

- The project failed to spark widespread public interest because it failed to define the problem. Residents had long been accustomed to a channelized creek system and may have been unable to envision alternatives. The research committed to promoting more environmentally attractive alternatives (letting the stakeholders choose their preferred alternative) meant that no alternative was available to the public early on as a possible incentive to participate. Thus, there was no sense of crisis and no organized push among local residents for a more aesthetically and environmentally beneficial watershed.

The project acknowledged from the start that the stakeholders' decision would be advisory, implying the stakeholders would have no authority in actual decision making. The study was intended to test drive a new decision-making methodology in a participatory process. The public may have been better motivated to participate if the project had been clearly a part of the decision-making process. Smith and McDonough's (2001) results suggest that even if the Omaha project had succeeded in attracting citizen participants to meetings, a voice of lack in actual government decision making may have had a politically harmful effect for the participating agencies.

The project failed to generate involvement from representatives of the real estate development industry, which was the second major candidate for considerable public opposition due to its potential influence in local environmental regulation. Bingham (1986) and others cite this as a key flaw, rendering untenable decisions. The authors believe the Omaha development industry sees little need for public participation because the current regulatory structure is quite restrictive. Agency representatives on the panel felt the net result was a decrease of pressure from the rest of the public, and any participatory effort lacking participation from the development industry was likely to be unrealistically rosy.

Widespread public complacency proved to be a problem for the project. Residents in the area were generally satisfied with government agencies in the area and rarely showed the hostility sometimes seen in rural Western communities. There was also no strong environmental or property rights activism regarding Papillion Creek; rather, the environment was not an issue many people felt strongly about. The complacency toward environmental issues may be more generally indicative of a local culture that is interested in getting involved in public affairs. Just as previous efforts, this project may be quite common. Flynn, for instance, describes an Irish "political culture unused to the very idea of participation" (1998, 203), Huitema summarizes, "it is hard to motivate [Canadian] citizens to become involved in a highly participatory process" (1998, 223), and in Italy, "the willingness to positively interact is normally very disputable" (Baldacci and Foreri 1998, 165).

The Papillion Creek case presents a particular challenge for implementing a participatory forum. One appears to require a crisis—or at least a defined policy issue—to motivate participants, as well as a decision-making structure that grants authority to citizens. Even with those elements, however, the local climate of passive acceptance of representative governance may still have complicated any participatory effort.

Ideal Conditions for Citizen Participation

Innes et al. (1994), Margerum (forthcoming), Beierle (1999), and Howell, Olsen, and Olsen (1987) provide a comprehensive array of strategies for constructing effective participatory practices in environmental management. Commonly cited strategies are the careful selection of a representative group of stakeholders, a transparent decision-making process to build trust among the participants, clear authority in decision making, competent and unbiased group facilitators, regular meetings, and adequate financial resources to support the group process during the potentially long learning and decision-making process.

However, even if these strategies are employed, the participatory process is not necessarily achieving significant outcomes (more effective community decision making and a public that accepts the new policy as the most effective choice) may depend on the locale. Concrete ways to determine whether
collaborative or participatory decision making may work are provided with typologies using environmental (Yoder 1999) and stakeholder descriptions (Beierle 1999; Thomas 1995). Yet none of these typologies provide a unifying decision structure that is germane to the administrator with limited resources. Given a finite budget and a set of policy outcomes to produce, which issues are critically in need of stakeholder involvement before (and even during) implementation? Which decisions, on the other hand, would be unusually laborious to accomplish in a participatory format? The following describe several considerations of what may be described as ideal conditions for implementation of enhanced citizen participation in agency decision making.

**Low-Cost Indicators**
- Citizens readily volunteer for projects that benefit the entire community.
- Key stakeholders are not too geographically dispersed; participants can easily reach meetings.
- Citizens have enough time to attend meetings without harming their ability to provide for their families.
- The community is homogeneous, so the group requires fewer representatives of interest groups; smaller groups speed decision making.
- The topic does not require representatives to master complex technical information quickly.

**High-Benefit Indicators**
- The issue is gridlocked and a citizen mandate is needed to break the gridlock.
- Hostility toward government entities is high, and the agency seeks validation from community members to successfully implement policy.
- Community representatives with particularly strong influence are willing to serve as representatives.
- The group facilitator has credibility with all representatives.
- The issue is of high interest to stakeholders and may even be considered at "crisis stage" if actions are not changed.

**Non-Ideal Conditions for Citizen Participation**
Conversely, citizen participation may be ineffective and wasteful compared to traditional, top-down decision making under certain conditions. Any one of the following indicators is a conclusive reason to avoid a participatory process. Rather, if a community fits the following indicators overall more than it fits the previous indicators, the administrator may be better advised to use agency revenues for a more streamlined decision-making process, devoting the remainder of the resources for program implementation.

**High-Cost Indicators**
- An acquiescent public is reluctant to get involved in what is considered the job of government employees.
- The region is geographically large or presents other obstacles (such as heavy traffic) that make regular face-to-face meetings difficult.
- Many competing factions and socioeconomic groups require a very large participatory group.
- Low-income residents are key stakeholders for the issue at hand and should be included, yet they cannot be because of work and family priorities.
- Complex technical knowledge is required before participants can make decisions.
- The public does not recognize the issue under consideration as a problem, nor are potential competing policy alternatives familiar to the public.

**Low-Benefit Indicators**
- The public is generally not hostile toward government entities.
- The agency has had prior success in implementing policy without citizen participation (that is, the voting process is sufficient to guide policy-making behavior).
- The population is large, making it difficult for involved stakeholders to influence a significant portion of the population.
- The decisions of the group are likely to be ignored, no matter how much effort goes into their formation (the group does not have authority to make policy decisions).
- The decisions of the group are likely to be the same decisions produced by the government entity.

**Conclusion**
This article, while describing the very important benefits of citizen participation, also provides a litmus test for agencies to consider when they allocate resources for citizen-participation processes. Do citizens care enough to actively participate in policy making, or would resources devoted to participatory processes be better directed toward implementation? Does local citizen participation imply more opportunity for economically motivated special interests to dominate the decision process? Criticism lobbed at participatory efforts in environmental management may soon be heard in other sectors as decreasing government budgets require intense scrutiny of government performance outcomes.

Delegating environmental decision-making authority to citizens is a policy strategy lauded for its holistic consideration of local economic interests, yet criticized by the environment for its potential to roll back decades of environmental regulatory success. Evidence for the effectiveness of community participation in environmental management is in short supply, partly due to the problems inherent in measuring the success of environmental policies that may take decades to positively affect the environment. Perhaps even more difficult is the prospect of measuring incremental changes in the well-being of the general public as they become more engaged in the policy process.

Concern exists among environmentalists that locally based citizen-participation processes will lead to a relaxation of previously successful environmental regulation. Another concern, rarely voiced, is the potential wastefulness of the process if it is employed in a less-than-ideal community. Even if the citizen-participation process does not lead to relaxed environmental regulation, it may entail a significant expenditure of resources that could be used elsewhere to achieve better on-the-ground results. With widespread public benefit as the goal of any public policy process, it behooves the administrator to consider the advantages and disadvantages of the decision-making process when determining the most effective implementation strategy, bearing in mind that talk is not cheap—and may not even be effective.

**Notes**
1. Government funding for one component of the participatory effort (for example, the facilitator’s salary) is sometimes leveraged with private funds from foundations. This results in a reduction of agency costs, but it may not be sustainable because foundation funds are traditionally reluctant to fund permanent operations.
2. Interestingly, Amy (1983) warns of environmentalists in mediation processes being charmed and co-opted by opposing (usually business) interests, yet he does not consider the possibility of the reverse.
3. Channelization entails the removal of all streamside trees, other vegetation (except grass), and obstructions to water flow such as rocks and fallen trees.

**References**

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