CHAPTER VII

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND INTERACTION
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7.1 CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND INTERACTION

As a municipal elected official, your responsibility is to represent and act on behalf of not only a constituency but also the community as a whole. With this responsibility comes the task of knowing how to interact with the public effectively and how to actively promote citizen participation. This chapter provides an overview of techniques and theories for dealing with the public including background on representing the community, political parties and interest groups, neighborhood politics, and use of community surveys and related sampling techniques. Providing for effective citizen participation and interaction is not only in your interest as a municipal official, but it's a fundamental principal of good democratic governance.

7.101 Representing the Community: Trustees vs. Instructed Delegates

An interesting issue that any elected official will face is how to represent various citizens and their interests within a community. Often, the choice that an official is faced with involves acting as a *trustee or as an instructed delegate*. The concept was originally defined by the 18th century British statesman Edmund Burke who explained that legislators should act as trustees according to their "enlightened conscience" and should not sacrifice their "mature judgment" to the wishes of their constituents.

The **trustee** makes decisions based on their sense of right and wrong and what they believe will be in the best interest of the public as a whole. Generally, the decision takes into consideration both the present and the future with a focus on the long-term implications of an action. Because of personal experience or professional background, the elected official may have knowledge of certain facts that define a policy question and thus may better understand the costs and consequences of a decision than a majority of his or her constituents. Consequently, an official may be obliged to a higher standard of accountability in advancing the public interest in the face of competing private interests and irrespective of re-election consequences.

Alternatively, an **instructed delegate** votes and makes his/her decisions based on the majority of one's constituents, or the people that voted for him/her. The instructed delegate acts as an agent of the voters and thus will reflect the will of the majority of the representative's constituents. Under these circumstances, the official will base decisions on what the voters want even if the official does not agree and irrespective of what is in the public's interest. This decision-making strategy will not satisfy the interests of all the citizens nor necessarily meet the fundamental needs of the community but it will probably facilitate reelection of the municipal official.

The arguments for and against the "instructed delegate" and "trustee" decision-making strategies have been pondered by political philosophers for centuries with little improvement since Burke first formulated the options. Today, however, experienced representatives seem to understand that, on a great many minor issues and on some not-so-minor issues, they may be able to respond as an "instructed delegate" to the demands of their constituents. At other times and on other issues, the well-being of the community requires that the representative transcend the wishes of even a large majority of constituents and vote, instead, for his or her understanding of the public's interest and, in doing so, risk losing the esteem as well as the votes of his or her own constituency. The reality is that no elected official serving his or her community as a member of the governing body wants to vote against the will of a majority of the community. He or she will do so and vote as a "trustee" of their community's well-being only under the most clear and urgent circumstances and not always even then.

7.102 Political Parties

A political party can be thought of as a political organization with an expressed ideology that seeks to attain and maintain power within government. This vision of the political party is often bolstered by a written platform with specific goals. Often parties are formed from a coalition of disparate interests.

There can be either partisan or nonpartisan elections in municipalities across Montana. This decision is dependent on the form of local government and type of election chosen (see 7-3-219 and 314, MCA, for more information). If a partisan election is the election process used, officials will determine which political party is most appropriate given their personal views and future political plans. All of Montana's 129 incorporated municipalities conduct partisan elections for their mayor and council members.

In most Montana communities, partisan politics have relatively little to do with local policy issues, let alone the revenue and service delivery problems that confront local officials. At the local level, few elected officials would argue that party affiliation is at all relevant to local policy-making beyond providing party identification on the ballot at election time. As one experienced mayor observed, "Potholes don't wear party labels!"

Do political parties make a difference in Montana's local electoral politics? Survey work conducted by the Local Government Center of mayors and council members showed the majority of those sampled reported political party affiliation had little or no influence on their policy decisions or election. In nonpartisan municipal elections, name recognition frequently seems to be the decisive advantage.

Whether a municipal election is on a partisan or nonpartisan ballot, the role of political parties in the general election of Montana's local officials is relatively minor, as compared to the important role that local political parties continue to play in the election of state and national officials. No doubt there are still municipalities where this general characterization is less than accurate.

Because most municipal elections are nonpartisan, the county election administrator may ***waive the requirement for a primary election*** if:
- the number of candidates for an office exceeds three times the number to be elected to that office in no more than one-half of the offices on the ballot; and
- the number of candidates in excess of three times the number to be elected is not more than one for any office on the ballot, 13-14-115, MCA.

If an election administrator determines that a nonpartisan primary election need not be held, the election administrator musty notify the governing body, which may require that a primary election be held if it passes a resolution not more than 10 days after the close of candidate filing. For more information or clarification on this statute, contact the Montana Secretary of State's office at (406)444-5376 or visit the Montana Secretary of State website.

7.103 Interest Groups

Interest groups are generally made up by individuals who act for the benefit of larger groups of people and who are linked by common concerns, values, and preferences. These individuals act in concert to influence the decisions of government to advance shared interests. In Montana's local political arena, the term would include such diverse entities as a neighborhood advisory council, the parent-teacher association, trade unions, a main street business association, or Chamber of Commerce.

Some observers of the Montana political scene have argued that interest groups are a problem that complicates the search for solutions to the many difficult policy issues confronting Montana government at both the state and local level. Others believe that these groups provide an effective method of what Wiseman (1966) calls "interest articulation," defined as the process by which members of the public express their needs to a local government. Interest articulation can range from personal contact with government officials to the development of formal interest groups. Interest articulation can have different outcomes in different situations and can include lobbying, peaceful protest, phone calls, and letters to policymakers.

According to Almond (1958) there are generally four types of interest groups:

1. Anomic groups that are often spontaneous groups with a collective response to a particular frustration,
2. Non-associational groups that are rarely well-organized and their activity is dependent upon the issue at hand,
3. Institutional groups that are formal and have some political or social function in addition to the particular interest and,
4. Associational groups that are formed specifically to represent an issue of a particular group.

In general, political influence in Montana's local politics is fairly widely-dispersed among competing interest groups and is not concentrated in political parties nor in narrowly based political, social or economic elites. While there are, no doubt, a few exceptions to this general proposition, especially where the prevailing political party or a corporate giant holds sway, the elected officials in most of Montana's municipal governments are obliged to sort out the competing interests brought to the governing body by a wide range of groups and individuals, each seeking its own best interests.

Regardless, interest groups provide local governments with two purposes; they can either serve as a restraint with a type of veto power over an action or decision, or they can provide an amplifying effect and provide legitimacy to policy decisions.

7.104 Neighborhood Politics

One type of interest group is a neighborhood advisory council, or residential community associations, or other more informal neighborhood group with the potential to influence local governments. Neighborhood political groups, such as residential community associations have experienced phenomenal growth in recent years with great potential power and influence in local government regarding community services, housing policy, and land use planning (Dilger, 1992). Knowledge of and proactive interaction with these specific interest groups can provide for more effective government functioning as well as legitimizing policy decisions.

7.105 Community Councils

Community councils are one method of formally sanctioning citizen participation in local government. These councils may be authorized to provide citizens the opportunity to advise a city council on any number of issues (see 7-3-223, 7-3-317, 7-3-417 and 7-3-516, MCA). While not common across the Montana municipal government landscape, these councils can perform such functions as providing detailed information on a particular neighborhood problem, or researching and advising a solution to a pressing land use issue. Community councils are advisory only and thus do not take away the authority of the local government official.

7.106 Community Surveys

There are many methods of understanding community opinions and attitudes about a specific policy decision, whether past or pending. The method of surveying depends on financial resources, the timeline to complete the work, the size of the population to be studied, available personnel, and expertise in survey work. While there are many costs associated with community surveys, there is also great benefit including measuring community satisfaction on a particular topic, confirming what may be already known anecdotally, or as a means of educating both local government officials and the citizenry themselves.

Community surveys often sample only a fraction of a total population. A sample is a representative part of a larger group (be it a neighborhood, ward, or entire municipality) whose opinions or attitudes are studied to gain information about the whole. A survey of the entire population (called a census) is often impractical and unnecessary since, if done correctly, statistical inference can generalize the results of a small sample to a larger population.

To begin a community survey, a survey instrument must first be developed. Use of citizens in the development of this survey can be integral to both the validity of the questions asked as well as a sense of ownership that citizens may feel over the survey process. Survey instruments can take many forms and depend on the sampling technique to be used but include door-to-door canvassing using a written questionnaire, on-line survey for those with an internet connection, mail-back questionnaires, or telephone sampling. Each of these techniques has costs and benefits depending on the objective of the survey, sample size, and available resources.

With proper training, citizens can also assist with sampling, further legitimating the survey process. Officials should be familiar with sampling techniques or contract the survey work to experts before authorizing citizens to conduct survey work. Critical to a successful survey is minimizing the margin of error, defined as the amount of random sampling error in the survey results. The larger the margin of error, the less faith one should have that the reported results closely represent the entire population.

In addition to community surveys, city officials may use a number of other techniques to engage citizens in open and informed conversations about policy issues. This current era marks a more deliberative democratic turn taking place in local governments across the United States. Various deliberative forums are structured in many ways including citizen juries, electronic town hall meetings, national issues forums, and neighborhood conversations all involving two key elements of deliberative democracy; objective background information and a structured environment for discussing an issue (Cavalier 2009).

7.107 Focus Groups

Another effective means to engage the public is the use of focus groups. A focus group is a structured discussion with pre-selected individuals that is intended to collect information or gauge public opinion on a specific policy issue or idea. Focus groups are traditionally used in market research to determine consumer's opinions of products or services but are increasingly used in local government settings to provide a deliberative venue for learning, trust-building, creative problem solving, and ultimately as a way for citizens to influence policy or to educate government officials. The group is led by an impartial facilitator, using someone outside of local government. Focus groups typically involve a small assembly of individuals (usually numbering between 5 and 15) based on their relationship to an issue and representation of community demographic characteristics.

A focus group may provide insightful understanding of complex issues and situations which cannot be gathered from standard surveys or large public meetings. Focus groups also provide an opportunity for individuals to

express their views in detail, to hear the opinions of others, and to collectively develop resolutions to problems. Both technical and anecdotal information can be presented and debated, which can lead to creative problem-solving and broad community support for a potential local government action. Perhaps most importantly, a successful focus group can enhance and support the work of local government officials.

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