

Preface

Transforming community engagement in planning by working at the edge: Finding our way in conversation

It's February 2009. I'm sitting with my dear friend of 30 years, Colette Meunier, in her home in Benicia, Northern California. Colette was a student of mine at Berkeley in the 1970s and has had a long and successful career in local government in Canada and the United States. Despite living thousands of miles apart, we have maintained a close friendship, partly because of our passion for planning – and community engagement. I've asked Colette, my host, to help me understand why creativity is needed in community engagement and to provide some examples of how engagement is undertaken in her adopted country, the US.

Wendy: So, Colette, from your experience, why do Canadian and American planners need to change our approaches to community engagement?

Colette: The problems planners are now grappling with – global climate change, peak oil, sustainability and global economic interdependency – are very different in scale, complexity and urgency from what most of us have worked on up to now. The urgent, potentially catastrophic, long-term and widespread nature of these problems requires radical rethinking about how we will decide what to do about them and how we will make the changes in our communities and our lives to prevent global disaster.

Wendy: Oh, Colette. I so agree! Last year when I was researching and writing *Kitchen Table Sustainability*, I felt that I could not open another book that began by chronicling the loss of species, the sea level rise, desertification and the magnitude of the catastrophe.¹ It's so urgent. And yet I am certain that we cannot lose hope and

become dispirited. If we lose our creativity in the midst of all these crises, we will be doomed.

Why do you think we need to focus on changing *community* planning?

Colette: Finding the solutions to the problems we face will draw on all of our ingenuity and the implementation of the solutions won't just change the physical infrastructure of our communities – it will change how we live our everyday lives. Local government is the governmental level that is most accessible to people in general. It is the one most people have the greatest contact with and the one that has the most direct and visible effect on people's daily lives. I believe that it is at this level that we will most meaningfully grapple with solutions and implement them. However, for us to be successful, we will need to change how we engage people in the planning process.

Wendy: Can you give me a sense of a typical community-planning process?

Colette: The public agencies I worked for or observed have a strong commitment to public participation, often extending far beyond the minimum legal requirements. Part of starting a planning process includes setting up a specific public participation program for the specific planning effort, which may include methods such as a steering committee, a series of public forums or community meetings, administering a questionnaire, stakeholder interviews, publishing a newsletter about the planning process or a combination of methods.

The planning process may vary from municipality to municipality or change based on what the planning process is addressing, but generally, the typical community-planning process starts with professional staff or consultants collecting data, analysing trends and identifying issues. This information is presented to the public. The next step is to develop a range of alternatives that addresses

the community concerns and issues. The alternatives are publicly evaluated and discussed to select a preferred alternative or alternatives. The plan is prepared based on the preferred alternative and is then subject to formal public review, hearing and adoption by elected and appointed decision-makers who make the final decisions about the plan. The plan policies and implementation programs mostly focus on what is in the control of the local community. Only occasionally do they include coordination with other levels of government and agencies or seeking changes in state or federal legislation and programs. They rarely propose any changes to our free-market economy.

Wendy: And what about adoption of a plan? What typically happens in that phase?

Colette: As proposed plans are considered for adoption, local councils are lobbied by lots of people, each trying to get a change in the proposed plan to address their individual interests. Once plans are adopted, they are often amended to address individual issues but only infrequently comprehensively reviewed and updated. Few communities have processes in place to monitor implementation of the adopted plan's policies and programs. Finally, the adoption of the plan concludes the public engagement process and the participatory program ends.

Wendy: What factors constrain community engagement, in your experience?

Colette: I would say public complacency and limited funding. Only a small percentage of a community's population participates in most planning efforts. People don't participate for many reasons. Some people are already very busy with their jobs, family and friends and feel they do not have time to participate. Others are generally pretty satisfied with their communities, feel no sense of urgency to seek changes and think others will adequately represent their concerns

and issues. Some are cynical and disillusioned about whether the plan or their participation in the preparation of the plan will make any meaningful difference. Sometimes, people find the planning outcomes to be technical, abstract or otherwise hard to translate into concrete, foreseeable outcomes.

Wendy: What usually happens when the money runs out?

Colette: That's a good question. Public agencies often cannot afford to allocate sufficient staff resources, training or money for public engagement methods that reach a broader cross-section of the community and draw them into the planning process. Those who do participate are likely to be organized or powerful groups, such as bicycle advocates or business interests, those whose property interests will be directly affected and those with strong opinions and interest in the issues to be addressed by community planning. And, no surprise, many American planning processes are combative and argumentative, conclude with disaffected participants who do not support the adopted plan and result in litigation.

Wendy: Hmm. That's a good point. When the belts tighten, can we still be creative? We may need to add an additional dose of ingenuity to our creativity. So, how robust do you think current approaches are to address the challenges we see coming down the pike?

Colette: Well, I am afraid that in this country our current approaches will not successfully address problems like global climate change. Our understanding of the causes, mechanisms and rate of climate change is rapidly changing and evolving. The development of solutions to address climate change is occurring in a variety of disciplines, in the public, private and non-profit sectors and in countries around the world. Successfully addressing climate change will require drawing on the wisdom and creativity from all these sources for solutions and likely require significant changes in how we live our daily lives, especially in North America. That's only going to happen

with profound common understanding, acceptance and ongoing commitment to making the changes.

Wendy: I totally agree. The same applies in Australia, of course. We're huge culprits when it comes to carbon emissions, for example. One of the challenges for *Creative Community Planning* (and certainly for *Kitchen Table Sustainability*) is to help people come to understand that in many cases 'less is more'.

What changes do *you* think are necessary, Colette?

Colette: I believe that the following changes in community planning and public engagement are needed to address the problems we face:

- Creative, more extensive public engagement.
- Public engagement throughout the life of a community plan.
- Coordination and collaboration across disciplines, levels of government and sectors of the economy.

Generally speaking, the reasons given for public engagement processes include:

- Finding out the public's preferences.
- Incorporating the local knowledge of community members.
- Advancing fairness and justice.
- Legitimizing public decisions as inclusive and democratic.
- Complying with legal requirements for public notice and hearing.²

Wendy: And what about simply paying more attention – or listening – to the community? And to communities?

Colette: That's my point, really. The basic purpose of public engagement is *engagement*. Most people will agree that these urgent problems must be addressed if we are to be successful in addressing

the challenges of global climate change, peak oil, sustainability and global economic interdependency. They will also be interested in learning more and contributing their knowledge and perspectives to the evolving understanding of the problems and will be committed to making the necessary changes in our lives and in our society.

Wendy: Can you spell out some specific reasons or rationales?

Colette: Yes. An important reason for public engagement processes is to develop and share a common understanding. A second important reason is to nurture and mutually reinforce heartfelt, widespread commitment to implementation of the plan's recommendations. We are asking people to make significant changes in how they live. This will best occur if people have had meaningful participation in preparing the plan and its recommendations and an ongoing voice in assessing the efficacy of the plan and its implementation.

Our community planning processes will need to identify and incorporate more community leadership, consensus building and negotiation. This is hard to do where all the public engagement is *advisory*. How do parties negotiate and make tradeoffs when these may be ignored or undone by the ultimate decision-makers? Public engagement processes may need to culminate in different decision-making processes.

Wendy: Everyone's talking about diversity these days. To what extent is addressing diversity part of your philosophy?

Colette: It's very important. Diversity will be essential to ensuring that we draw on all of our collective knowledge and consider all concerns and values to craft successful solutions that will be widely embraced. To be successful, we will have to have a level of commonality of purpose, openness and the willingness to listen and learn from others that I have seen only rarely and in relatively small settings.

Wendy: Thanks, Colette. It's been great talking to you about this. From the look on your face, though, you've got something more to say. What is it?

Colette: Oh, Wendy, I wonder, are we up to the challenge? I believe we have to be. Our existing community-planning and public-engagement approaches too often leave us in conflict and without bold enough solutions to really address our concerns. We need to energize and transform our usual ways of doing business and unleash our creativity to engage with each other, finding the paths to making a real difference.

Our conversation made me think of my friend Graeme Dunstan, an Australian activist and artist.³ A couple of months after my conversation with Colette, Graeme and I are sitting on the deck of our Nimbin house, reminiscing about the projects we've worked on together. We're old friends and we've had some amazing adventures in the course of community engagement. We realize that 20 years have passed since our first project together in Melbourne. I can just hear him listening to my conversation with Colette and exclaiming, 'They haven't got it!'

So no better person to speak with than the man himself. Here's a snippet of our conversation.

Wendy: Graeme, why is creativity important in community engagement? Why do you have to 'act out' things, as we did for VicRoads in Melbourne in 1990⁴ and you did in the 2004 Safe Communities conference session?⁵

Graeme: It's about hearing all the voices. *All* the voices. So we are looking to find out what pops into being. I use acting because playfulness and spontaneity are the most revealing. Humans are most creative when they are excited, when they are laughing together and when they are stimulated in some way. I'm after the poetry of the moment.

And we need to be artful about it. So, I say to people, if you want to ask these questions [like ones about safe communities], let's make it artful; let's make it beautiful and let's make it memorable. We want the answers to remain with the participants, surely.

Wendy: Why is beauty important, Graeme?

Graeme: It's uplifting. It brings people together and lifts up their vision of what's possible for themselves. I ask, 'How can we make it beautiful together?' And 'How can we make this interesting and challenging?'

Wendy: What's one lesson you take away from the work we've done together?

Graeme: I've always done CCD [Community Cultural Development] work. That's been my mission since the Aquarius Festival here in Nimbin in 1973. I came back to Nimbin after Aquarius and thought it's all about creating the culture for people with different dreams. You know, they had very different dreams, those Nimbin pioneers in 1973. And I have been here – and doing this work – ever since. Now I am asking, 'How do you create a cultural movement for water in the Murray Darling basin? How do we do that and save that poor river – for future generations?'

Wendy: Why is this work so challenging?

Graeme: It's an empty field. It's an abyss. Most people are asleep in front of the TV. But, with this work, when the change comes, it sweeps them up and carries them along.

Wendy: What sorts of skills do you need for this 'artful' work?

Graeme: You need a good effort, patience and plenty of time. I've seen the transformation of social planning in the time I've been

working with you. Now it's changed dramatically in Australia. What we did 20 years ago – at the frontier – is now a sign of good practice.

You know, good energy is never wasted. But you need patience. I say, 'Just do it!'

Wendy: What do you say back to people who say that community cultural development is insubstantial, 'airy fairy' stuff?

Graeme: 'Lofty and impractical' is what they are saying. People often say that. But if they looked inside themselves, they'd find that this loftiness has roots that go deep. And when these [CCD] principles are put into practice, they have great influences.⁶

Reflecting on these two conversations, I realize how grateful I am to the people who helped me keep my creativity alight in my workplace. First would have to be my mentor, Clare Marcus, whose work I discuss briefly in Chapter 4. I've been blessed with courageous colleagues (among them the bravest would have to be Kelvin Walsh, the *tall koala* in the story about the Aurora project team workshop told in Chapter 2). And I've had courageous clients, especially Bryce Moore and Jill Lim of the now-defunct Urgent and Regional Land Authority in Melbourne. More recently, my life has been enlivened by the fire and passion of Yollana Shore, who guides me with her wisdom and whose heart-warming and heartstorming approaches to creative visualization we discuss in Chapter 4.

In many ways, this book is a reflection on engagement practices to help us get our communal heads around some of the major issues of our day such as isolation from interactions with Nature and each other, exclusion in decision-making processes, increasing poverty and feelings of individual hopelessness and despair. To prevent ourselves and our communities from inaction or spiritual or emotional paralysis, we feel it is important to focus on creativity, beauty, relationships and skilled facilitation. However, we find little support from much of the existing community engagement discourse preoccupied

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with hard-surfaced themes such as objectivity, efficiency, risk avoidance, reducing bias and formalizing engagement processes.

Creative Community Planning suggests we slip into a different way of being and acting together in the world – one that is at once practical, musical and light. It provides a needed synthesis of a broad and dynamic field, bringing the discourse up to date for all types of community practitioners working in unique and constantly changing environments.

Acknowledging that many of us identify ourselves in a hybrid of fields (more wildflower than mono-crop), we have written this book for people who find themselves cross-pollinated within these various communities: planners, policy makers, community engagement practitioners, community cultural development practitioners, local decision makers, urban and landscape designers, social workers, community group participants, qualitative researchers, artists, activists, teachers and students. We've written it for professionals who want to enhance their practices with more creativity.

With beauty, playfulness and reflection, we offer this book as an invitation to create your own meaningful and transformative work through community engagement practice.

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May 2009