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A Public Policy Institute Year of Discovery: Building Capacity for Citizen Dialogue

by Gary Petree, Training Consultant

THE UNIVERSITY of TENNESSEE 

MUNICIPAL TECHNICAL ADVISORY SERVICE

In cooperation with the Tennessee Municipal League



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The Municipal Technical Advisory Service (MTAS) was created in 1949 by the state legislature to enhance the quality of government in Tennessee municipalities. An agency of the University of Tennessee Institute for Public Service, MTAS works in cooperation with the Tennessee Municipal League and affiliated organizations to assist municipal officials.

By sharing information, responding to client requests, and anticipating the ever-changing municipal government environment, MTAS promotes better local government and helps cities develop and sustain effective management and leadership.

MTAS offers assistance in areas such as accounting and finance, administration and personnel, fire, public works, law, ordinance codification, and water and wastewater

management. MTAS houses a comprehensive library and publishes scores of documents annually.

MTAS provides one copy of our publications free of charge to each Tennessee municipality, county and department of state and federal government. There is a \$10 charge for additional copies of "A Public Policy Institute Year of Discovery: Building Capacity for Citizen Dialogue."

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A Public Policy Institute Year of Discovery: Building Capacity for Citizen Dialogue

“A year of discovery” best describes the first year of Public Policy Institute (PPI) activity at the University of Tennessee Municipal Technical Advisory Service (MTAS). Attending several Kettering-sponsored events gave us enough experience to clear the mysteries of meaning, method, and purpose behind the deliberative dialogue concept and helped us clarify our potential for greater service to the state and communities of Tennessee as a PPI.

One startling revelation is that, according to a Kettering Foundation report dated November 2006, ours is one of only five states in the nation where citizens have not had an organized effort for opportunities to participate in public forums about national issues.¹ Changing this circumstance requires us to build awareness by providing opportunities for citizens to participate in the deliberative dialogue process. The potential benefit associated with this change is having the voice of citizens focused on important public issues in a timely manner, enhanced by measures of organization and civility. Enlightenment made available through the Kettering Foundation facilitated our discovery of a path to greater public service, for us and for our primary customers, through building the capacity for deliberative dialogue in communities throughout the state of Tennessee.

The potential significance of this change is as great at the local level as it is at the state and national levels. The fundamental nature of local government services is that they affect the lives of citizens

on a daily basis in many different and personal ways. And, while it may seem as though citizens have better access to their local government than they do their state and national governments, for an abundance of reasons citizens are just as likely to feel ostracized from the process of government at the local level as they are at the state and national levels. Decisions are often made at council meetings or committee meetings that cascade into what seems like an irreversible avalanche of public sentiment with concerned citizens and the news media on one side and public administrators and elected officials on the other. In general, elected officials and professional public administrators understand and appreciate the citizens’ role in local governance, and neither group intends to behave in a dictatorial manner. Nevertheless, nothing speaks louder than actions. When public decisions have an immediate and significant impact on a group of citizens, they want to know where, when, and how they were suppose to have had input or why their opinions seemingly had no impact in the decision process. The capacity for deliberative dialogue at the local level can serve as the vehicle on which we all ride together out of what sometimes seems like a never-ending cycle of “us-and-them” scenarios.

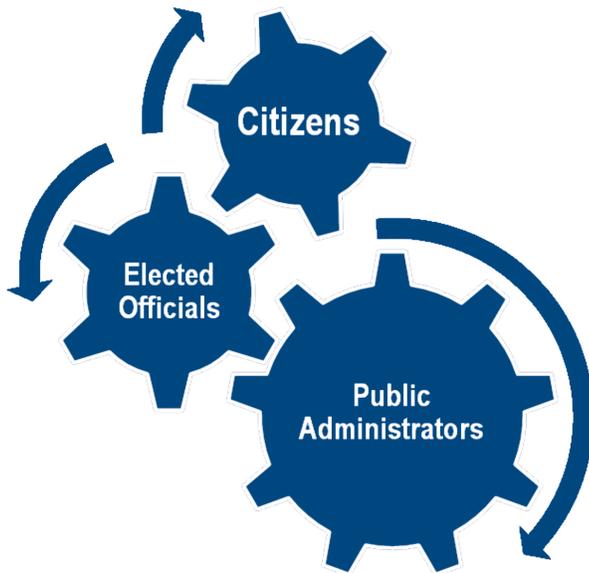
INTENTION

MTAS is one of four agencies of the UT Institute for Public Service (IPS). Enhancing and improving the lives of citizens of Tennessee is the ultimate focus of all our efforts. Within the vision of improving the quality of life for Tennesseans, MTAS delivers learning and development opportunities in the form

¹ p. 38, *Democracy’s Challenge: Reclaiming the Public’s Role*. An Analysis of Results from the 2005-2006 National Issues Forum, A Kettering Report prepared by Doble Research Associates, November 2006.



of consulting and training services to professional public administrators, public service employees and elected officials. Engaging citizens in the process of deliberative dialogue will extend our learning and development services to the third party of a tri-lateral responsibility for local-level governance in a democratic society.



The education process must not focus exclusively on citizens and citizen groups. Elected officials and public administrators must also train toward a level of competence and understanding in the deliberative dialogue process that will allow them to recognize, articulate, and interpret its value and to coordinate and moderate the process when and if conditions are appropriate. Ultimately, our intent is to improve the quality and quantity of citizen participation in local government.

OBJECTIVE

Our primary objective as a Public Policy Institute is to build local capacity for deliberative dialogue. We will model the process as a way for citizens to participate in public policy decisions, and as a way for elected officials and public administrators to provide opportunities for citizen participation. With 347 municipalities in the state, collaborations and partnerships will be our key to progress.

METHODS

Collaboration and Partnerships

While the various events and activities sponsored by The Kettering Foundation during our first year have proven very valuable in helping us understand our role and opportunities in the deliberative dialogue process, they have been equally valuable in helping us build external partnerships. We already can acknowledge material support from associates at the University of Georgia and Clemson University for our first moderator training session. We also received and fulfilled an invitation to moderate a forum on the University of Virginia campus as part of the agenda for the Southern Consortium of University Public Service Organizations 2008 Spring Conference. Attendees at the forum included representatives from the University of South Carolina, the University of Maryland and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. These relationships allow us to strengthen our performance as a PPI by learning from other PPIs, and to share our experiences with other organizations that may aspire to PPI status.

We also have many opportunities for collaboration and partnership within the University of Tennessee system. The new Howard Baker Center for Public Policy opened this spring on the Knoxville campus with the mission to improve the understanding of public policy issues and to promote public service. The University of Tennessee network of campuses in Knoxville, Chattanooga, Martin, Tullahoma and Memphis represents opportunities for resources to support regional outreach efforts; and the Institute of Agriculture has an extension office and agents with significant outreach potential in each of Tennessee's 95 counties. Since these organizational components share the university umbrella and all are logical stakeholders in the success of a deliberative dialogue capacity, their partnership and collaboration strengthens our efforts to reach citizens of Tennessee in all walks of life.



As a part of the Institute for Public Service, we have the potential to access office resources available in 10 cities across the state: Johnson City, Knoxville, Oak Ridge, Chattanooga, Cookeville, Columbia, Nashville, Jackson, Martin and Memphis. One of our sister agencies within IPS, County Technical Assistance Service (CTAS), provides services focused on county governments similar to those of MTAS for cities. Here again, educating citizens in the valuable process of deliberative dialogue will bolster the critical component of citizen involvement in public policy decisions at the local government level, and the staff at CTAS can help focus opportunities in appropriate channels of county governments throughout the state.

MTAS also can mobilize some organic resources to build local capacity for deliberative dialogue. MTAS groups the 347 Tennessee cities into 10 districts, each of which is served by an MTAS management consultant who can serve as an emissary to the cities in their districts. Several of our management consultants and technical consultants (police, fire, HR, etc.) serve in support positions for statewide public administration associations and can help create and support opportunities to build awareness for forums through their networks. We also sponsor graduate level public administration students from UT's Political Science department to serve internships in Tennessee cities. Two of our most recent interns are now serving as Tennessee city managers. We will sponsor more interns each year, and introducing and involving interns in the deliberative dialogue process will not only provide them with valuable insights about how the process can serve their careers and their cities, it also will help us distribute the capacity for deliberative dialogue in Tennessee communities in years ahead.

Training and Forums

MTAS has the staff and opportunity to introduce the deliberative dialogue concept into the curricula and alumni event activities that we provide, sponsor

or co-sponsor throughout the state. Five people on the MTAS training staff and two people on our management consulting staff are now trained to serve as forum moderators and conduits for training. The Local Government Leadership Program and its annual alumni event is ideally situated to provide opportunities for us to model the deliberative dialogue process with city and county elected officials. Two other training programs, our Municipal Administrator Program and our Municipal Management Academy, provide similar opportunities with public sector administrators and employees. Here again, the focus of training for these groups will be to model the process as a way to provide opportunities for citizen participation.

Our first moderator training session in March 2008 marked the beginning of our efforts to extend the opportunity for deliberative dialogue participation to citizens. That event resulted in collaboration and partnership opportunities with representatives from the League of Women Voters, Girl Scouts of Tanasi Council, Work Force Development of the Knoxville Chamber of Commerce, Smoky Mountain Chapter of the American Society for Training and Development, the Howard Baker Center for Public Policy, UT Department of Public Administration, UT Institute of Agriculture, UT MTAS management consultants from Middle Tennessee and UT MTAS management consultants from West Tennessee. We will maintain contact with these participants to encourage and support their deliberative dialogue initiatives and to cultivate additional opportunities to provide moderator training.

As we have learned through discussions with other PPI representatives, modeling the deliberative dialogue process is a significant step in building awareness and appreciation for its value and purpose. As we train and work with elected officials and public servants in Tennessee cities, we will use National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) materials to model the process.



Ultimately, we hope to find support for a public service opportunity to partner with community leaders to frame and facilitate forum activity for a local issue. We have one MTAS staff member trained in issues framing, and there are plans to have at least a second person trained within six months. We will achieve a significant measure of success when we finally build sufficient confidence in the process at a local level so that local leaders are willing to commit themselves and their communities to using the process to facilitate public decision making.

SUMMARY

The results of our first year efforts include collaborative relationships started with several stakeholders and a heightened awareness of opportunities for several other similar partnerships. We anticipate that our second year will be one of success measured by opportunities to model the deliberative dialogue for public servants and citizens in a variety of venues. Here again, the focus of our effort will be on ultimately extending the deliberative dialogue participation opportunity to citizens in Tennessee communities in order to build local capacity for the process to develop and sustain itself. We recognize the unlikelihood of an immediate transformation from the current state of affairs to an environment that reflects our vision. Sociopolitical evolution, not revolution, moved us away from deliberative dialogue as a normal behavior. Our opportunity as a PPI is to nudge the pendulum of sociopolitical behavior in Tennessee communities so that the benefits of deliberative dialogue are prominently restored in the local governance environment.



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