



SHARED GOVERNANCE IN THE CITY OF FAYETTEVILLE

BY KALI SAPOSNICK

Until 1983, state legislation had prohibited the city of Fayetteville, North Carolina, from annexing—that is, extending its municipal boundaries to encompass surrounding urban-like areas. While other North Carolina municipalities, such as Charlotte and the Raleigh-Durham area, kept pace with urban growth and became some of America's most desirable cities to live in, Fayetteville remained stagnant. Its urban area grew, but because it did so outside the city limits, many areas lacked municipal services. Once the legislation was changed to allow Fayetteville to grow like other cities in the state, it had to play catch up.

City staff members realized that extending municipal boundaries would require dealing with new citizens—many of whom might not be happy being “annexed” into the city. The staff needed to develop an effective process to educate people on how the benefits of living in Fayetteville outweighed the costs and to show them that the government was going to approach change differently than it had in the past. “We needed citizens’ support as we developed new infrastructures that affected their property and their pocketbook,” explains Terrie Hutaff, assistant to the city manager for organizational development and training. “For instance, we had to figure out how to convince thousands of urban residents of the importance of moving from wells and septic tanks to a public water and sewer system when their own well or tank worked perfectly fine. We

wanted them to understand that their neighbors’ current or future problems were connected to their own lives.”

Citizens Engage in Decision-Making

To expand the city while addressing potential opposition from citizens, officials decided to use a more collaborative approach to governance, in which they would share information with and gather feedback from a wide range of stakeholders. One of the first steps Fayetteville’s city manager, Roger Stancil, took to make this shift was to create a management team that shared leadership responsibility—including exchanging knowledge, solving problems, and making decisions on implementation—with both citizens and other employees. This new approach required the collaboration of diverse departments, such as police and fire services, garbage collection, public works, and so on, most of which operated autonomously in the past.

Influenced by ideas in *The Fifth Discipline* by Peter Senge (Currency/Doubleday, 1990), Stancil invested time and money in transforming his staff’s thinking about systems structure and individual behavior. One of the city’s key initiatives has been involving the community in every aspect of the ongoing annexation process. Staff members have met regularly with citizens’ groups. Kept informed and included in the process, most residents accept annexation.

The success of the annexation process demonstrated to Stancil that he needed to create a system to deal with other issues in a similar way.

Stancil and his management team are currently applying the principles of organizational learning to develop a strategic plan that simultaneously encourages individual involvement and learning while building systems that support organizational change.

The city management team is also working on a more effective process for communicating with elected officials. Traditionally, the city council set goals and made policy decisions, which the city manager interpreted for his staff. The staff then tried the best they could to implement these goals. In the new process, in order to ensure a shared understanding of what is required, staff members articulate their interpretation of the goals to the council before spending resources. “For instance, we recently did an assessment of the council’s one-year targets and then fed this information back to them, basically inquiring, ‘Did we get it right?’” Hutaff explains. When council members expressed satisfaction with the assessment, the staff then further developed action plans, which the council also approved.

“This kind of deliberate communication rarely happened before,” says Hutaff. “By regularly checking with the council, we can use our time more efficiently and respond quickly as new information emerges.” The next proposed step is to have workshops focused on complex issues, such as a capital improvement plan, that require more intensive involvement of elected officials and the management team. “One of our biggest challenges,” Hutaff acknowledges, “is clarifying which people need to be part of making decisions to accomplish

Continued on next page >

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council's goals and then empowering them to do so."

Managers Set Shared Values

Today, the biggest difference people can observe in Fayetteville's governance is the improved relationships and collaboration among management team members, who are producing higher-quality decisions. Early on, the management team created a set of values for which they wanted to be recognized: ethics, teamwork, stewardship, respect, and professionalism. Acting consistently with these values means managing with

accountability; placing public interest above personal interest; understanding and appreciating people's diverse perspectives; and learning from each situation and adjusting behavior to enhance the ability to serve. For example, after several phases of annexing areas with large numbers of residents, the management team realized they were not capturing "lessons learned" effectively. They have since developed a process to capture these lessons and make needed changes before the next phase.

While recognizing the gradual nature of systemic change and current budget constraints, the city manager

has boldly expressed a long-term commitment to organizational development and training. "I will continue to dedicate resources to training, because developing people is the only way we'll create lasting change in our organization," Stancil says. "Group decision-making can be an arduous process, and it's easy to give up in the middle. But when participants take the long view, the results are truly worth it." ■

To learn more about Fayetteville, go to www.cityoffayetteville.org.

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