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A WORKSHOP FOR RHODE ISLAND LEGISLATORS

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A team approach to public affairs education is used in Rhode Island—despite the fact that there is only one public affairs specialist who spends about 40 percent of his time in public affairs. The size of a team ranges from two to five members. It includes the public affairs specialist and anyone else who wants a piece of the action. The forming and operating of a team are informal and rely on willingness of other staff members to be involved in public affairs education.

We believe that public affairs education should be the creation of a learning situation. It should be a way of getting “idea producers” and “idea users” together. We believe that the design of any particular learning situation is the joint task of the team and the clients.

With most groups, the planning of the program and a significant part of the program content is based on problem solving. One really valuable contribution the team makes to the partnership is its skill in helping groups define the problems, think through the structure of the problem, develop alternative solutions, and appraise the probable effects of various courses of action. Much of the instruction is done by persons specializing in subject matter fields that bear on the problem.

We usually have work in progress with one to three client groups at any one time, depending on how much effort a client requires of us. About half the time the contact between the team and the client is initiated by us.

In the past five years, clients have included: (1) leaders and residents of a suburban town, (2) leaders and citizens of a three-town rural area, (3) citizens who wished to form a small water district, (4) members of a regional organization of town councils, (5) citizens and leaders who wished to establish a Port Authority, (6) citizens and leaders who wished to protect a river basin area from pollution, (7) citizens, leaders, and officials who wished to form community action agencies, (8) the Rhode Island Association of Conservation Commissions, (9) civic groups, and (10) the Rhode Island legislators. The design of the educational programs has varied from a

single workshop to intensive instruction over part of a year or even over several years.

To evaluate our work we ask: (1) Did we form a sound and fair partnership for quality adult education? (2) Did we help the client group to learn to understand its problems? (3) Did we provide an educational input that made the client able to do without us, and did we have sense enough to get out when that point was reached? A "yes" answer to all three questions means to us that we are getting our job done. It is risky to speculate on the impact of our educational program on the actions taken by client groups after they have worked with us. However, we are quite happy to claim at least partial credit for many of the social, economic, and physical changes wrought by our current and former partners in public affairs education.

FORMAT OF WORKSHOP

The idea for the legislators workshop came from our agricultural editor. A committee was formed. Once it was decided that the project was feasible, a planning meeting which would involve the committee plus members of the legislature was scheduled.

At the planning session the ideas on public affairs education given in the first part of this paper were presented to the legislators. Next a list of topics and a rough draft of a schedule for a one-day workshop were distributed as a starting point. One measure of legislator participation in the planning session is the amount of revision of the draft materials. In the case of the schedule for the workshop, the original document was scrapped and an entirely new format for the workshop was prepared. Of the topics listed, 50 percent were replaced by those suggested by the legislators.

The format of the workshop emphasized: (1) treatment of a great number of topics, (2) a single session for all participants as opposed to small group or other workshop techniques, (3) the use of reactor panels, (4) freedom to raise questions at any time, and (5) ample time for informal discussion.

The day began with a presentation of the five alternative state-wide land use plans then under study by the Deputy Director of the Rhode Island Statewide Comprehensive Transportation and Land Use Planning Agency. The strong points and weak points of each plan were detailed by the Deputy Director. When the alternative land use patterns had been detailed, the remainder of the day was used for reaction panels and general discussion.

There were three reaction panels of three members each. The first reaction panel appraised the state-wide land use plans in light of

their impact on the human environment. It was moderated by the Planning Chief of the Rhode Island Development Council and included a member of the faculty of the University of Rhode Island Graduate School of Planning, a rural sociologist from the university, and a practicing Rhode Island city planner.

The second panel reacted to the land use plans, taking into account the effects on the biological environment. The panel included a wildlife ecologist, a biological oceanographer, and a resource economist, all from the University of Rhode Island.

The third panel dealt with the political and economic impact of the land use alternatives and included a Rhode Island town manager, a town tax assessor, and a resource economist.

After the members of each reaction panel had spoken, there was a question and answer period during which legislators could question any of the panelists. The formal part of the workshop began at 10:00 a.m. and ran until 5:00 p.m.

After a social hour and dinner, work was resumed and the discussion, this time on a very informal basis, continued until 11:00 p.m. Thirty of the 150 Rhode Island legislators participated in the workshop. While a greater number could have been induced to participate by using the good offices of the leaders of the House and Senate, no useful purpose could have been served by such a move.

As with our other public affairs work, the legislators workshop was handled by a team rather than by one person working alone. It differed from other programs in that the team included more of our highly placed administrators than have any of the other projects. We succeeded in making the planning of the workshop a joint effort in that the major decisions on format and content rested with the legislators. The problem solving input was present in the case of the legislators workshop. Through the presentation of alternative land use plans and the appraisals of these plans by the reactor panels and by the legislators, the structure of the problem of creating a high quality environment for Rhode Island people was explored and alternatives discussed.

As usual, the bulk of the technical material was presented by persons with no extension obligation. Of the fifteen people who presented information to the legislators, only one was from the extension service.

EVALUATION OF WORKSHOP

The workshop was held in October 1967. It is the author's

opinion that in the 1968 session the Rhode Island legislature moved more confidently and surely in the field of natural resources legislation and that it used University of Rhode Island faculty members more freely and often to speak to the various legislature committees. That more natural resource legislation was passed than in previous years is a matter of record. Clearly, it would be foolhardy to claim that a single workshop was responsible for this but it would be equally foolhardy not to claim at least a little of the credit.

In summary, the legislators workshop was one of our more interesting and challenging efforts. It represents the formation of an educational partnership with an important client group. The philosophy and methods used in planning and operating the workshop were consistent with those that guide our work with other clients.

ISSUES OF CONCERN TO LEGISLATORS

The legislators raised a number of issues during the course of the workshop. Because a number of public affairs specialists work in industrial urban states and because others become involved from time to time in issues having to do with nonagricultural uses of land and water, it is thought that a listing of legislator concerns might be useful to this group. The issues are listed in the order in which they were raised. The author has taken the liberty of paraphrasing some of the questions.

1. Why is there not more multiple use of publicly owned land and water areas?
2. Is there a need for state-wide zoning? If so should the zoning follow the Hawaiian model, a city-state model, existing trends, or some other model?
3. What government entity should be expected to tie plans and theory to action and reality?
4. In addition to zoning, what other measures can be used to implement a state-wide land use plan?
5. Must there always be conflict among the state, local, and federal levels of government?
6. How can legislators gain access to research findings and correlate and digest them so that the probable effects of legislation can be determined?
7. What will be the effects of the pending bill to defer taxes on farm and forest land?

8. What criteria can be used to determine the appropriate mix of forest species and to set goals for the kinds and amounts of forest uses in Rhode Island?
9. What is known about designing places for people to live? What are the positive and negative effects of various population densities? What mix of densities is best? Is it good to crowd people into cities? What living patterns should we strive for?

The formal program dealt with land and water resources. However, during the social hour, dinner, and the subsequent informal session, numerous questions were raised concerning spending strategies for poverty programs, welfare programs, and educational programs. But that, as Rudyard Kipling would say, is another story—and hopefully the theme for another workshop.