

Implementing Public Policy using Heart and Soul

By Tom Baker

This is my story of how Jim Kent and I translated Aspen and Basalt Colorado's *Heart & Soul (H&S)* into the more formal structures of various governments.

In terms of discovering, understanding and making *heart and soul* conscious, my experience is that a concerted effort needs to be made to connect with the "informal" networks and the "formal" structure of government-in that order. This intersection can be termed governance; however, not all governance makes this connection. In the early 1990's, I was Director of Affordable Housing for Aspen and Pitkin County and it was an especially turbulent time. Development was out of control and causing ever increasing land prices, which in turn created more and more pressure for affordable housing (AH), (at that time Aspen and Pitkin County had over 2,000 AH units, by 2009 we had over 3,000). The community's confidence in the AH program was at a low point. As I was to begin my new job my long time friend Jim Kent suggested that I spend the first month "*hanging out*" in the local gathering places to attempt to understand how the informal networks felt about the Housing Office and AH. Ten years later, 2000, when I was appointed Town Manager of Basalt Jim had the same advice for me.

What the *hanging out* did for me was connect me to the community without any filters. I listened to the language that community members used, which was very different than the language used by the newspapers, developers, planners and elected officials. This language was crucial for me to understand what people wanted and what they would be willing to support and why they would support it - in terms of AH in Aspen and Pitkin Co or general development and/or community building in Basalt. I also began to understand where the important gathering places were for different segments of the community, who were the important caretakers and communicators, which proved invaluable when I wanted grassroots interaction with a policy proposal, and how people survived, in some cases they worked around government policies that did not serve them. Also of critical importance was the question of what policy adjustments would serve people the best.

By hanging out (Kent calls this Management by Hanging Out) I gained critical insights into how the community viewed various public policy concerns and what they found important about an issue. Having this information I could influence the policy discussion at the formal level in a community friendly direction, which was the goal of most elected officials. However without a connection to the community's networks they were captured by a special interest group, which influenced their thinking and decisions and often prevented community interaction.

So, once someone is connected to the informal networks of a community how does this knowledge get translated into the formal structure? As you may expect there are two ways: informally, by honoring the language and ideas of the informal networks in policy discussions and by encouraging others in government to "hang out"; and formally, through documents and procedures, which fit the formal structures data and information system but honor the knowledge and wisdom within the informal networks. For example, in Basalt the Master Plan has a chapter titled, Civic Engagement and Social Capital. This chapter formalized the importance of understanding networks and their place in governance. Later, using the Basalt Master Plan's Civic Engagement and Social Capital concept, citizens were given the resources and responsibility to develop a River Master Plan. All three documents

referred to here can be found at www.basalt.net. This effort engaged over 40 community members directly (hundreds indirectly through the multiplier of informal networks), took 16 months to develop, and because of the support that had been built throughout the community it was adopted in two-weeks of formal hearings, unheard of in most governmental processes. (While this is a story that deserves its own paper, one discovery that we made was that community members are far more effective at dealing with developers than the typical elected official in terms of adhering to community goals and policy objectives. In Social Capital terms citizens would meet with developers to work out issue resolution at the informal level long before they got to the formal system)

In the Aspen/Pitkin Housing Office we set-up procedures for staffers to go to gathering places and network as a way to establish trust and build support in the community for affordable housing on a project by project basis. Staffers also vetted AH plans at gathering places to ensure that new projects were both understood and addressed the desires of the community. I still remember the point when the Housing Board became re-empowered for their mission to build affordable housing and build community after several years of battering by special interest groups. Jim and I had made a concerted effort to engage the community in gathering places and networking over the first three months of my tenure as Housing Director. During that time we learned what people wanted and how we could enlist them to help build affordable housing. At the time the Housing Board was developing plans for a downtown housing development. As was typical during that period of time, the Housing Board's meetings were crowded with people telling them that they were supporters of AH but not at this location and/or the development's density was too great and should be significantly reduced. This particular meeting was crucial for this particular downtown development – a go or no go point. The special interests were very empowered and many times sent their attorneys and real estate people to do the dirty work at the Housing Board's meetings.

As we became familiar with the informal networks, the people in the networks became familiar with us in the Housing Office. A trusting relationship developed and community members wanted to be involved in our (their community's) work. As a result, a number of community members came to the Housing Board's meeting because they now understood the issues and now saw an opportunity to "make a difference" in the community through the vehicle of affordable housing. It was a real eye opener for the community members present to see how the Housing Board was treated.

At one point a local real estate professional, who had property management duties and was the representative for an adjacent townhouse development said, "we don't want to see laundry hanging off the balconies and we don't want riff-raff in our neighborhood". This language now sounds ridiculous, but at the time it was typical of comments at the Housing Board meetings and the Housing Board was so disempowered that they sat there and took it. Immediately after the comment was made, Jennifer one of the concerned community members stood up turned to look at the real estate professional and said, in a very calm and caring way, "Mickey, I'm going to live there." At that moment everything changed. The issue stopped being an abstract problem about density and traffic and became a public policy issue about community and people. It's hard for me to communicate what happened, but I sensed that Jennifer's comment revealed the weakness of the opposition's argument and reminded everyone, especially the Housing Board, of affordable housing's fundamental importance to the community's overall goals. Jennifer's comment energized the Housing Board and they recaptured their sense of purpose – they even sat up straighter. The Housing Board concluded their deliberations and approved the development at the

recommended density with a unanimous vote. The room quietly emptied out. It was a new era

At that time Jennifer was a strong 30 year old professional that radiated gentleness, good will and selflessness. Jennifer's role in the Housing Board meeting was a metaphor for how an engaged community can direct its destiny. In a way, at that moment, I feel that Jennifer symbolized everything that was good about community, Aspen's character and what we stood to lose or gain regarding Aspen's future. It also reminded us all that – affordable housing was the policy vehicle that could help us attain larger community goals of diversity, quality of life and small town character. She modeled the qualities of *Heart & Soul* at that moment and into the future. The situation was totally unscripted – it just happened, but then again when you engage the community to assist with issues of public policy things seem to “just happen”.

Throughout the last 30 years, in local government, I have been involved as a staffer, community member and consultant in numerous difficult and divisive public policy issues. When the government trusts its citizens and engages them as partners to find solutions to those issues the outcome has always been positive for the community. I'm never disappointed and always amazed at how wise the collective community can be when asked to assist with community problems and public policy matters.



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