



JAMES KENT ASSOCIATES
Global Cultural Analysts

The “Oatmeal Circuit:”

Stories of Heart and Soul in Community

By James A. Kent, Center for Social Ecology and Public Policy

The Use of Informal Networks and Gathering Places, Essential Elements of Heart and Soul, Allows Denver International Airport to be Built.

The Denver Post newspaper reads: “*The Colorado General Assembly brokered a deal in 1985 to annex a 40 + acre plot of land in Adams County into the city of Denver, and use that land to build a new airport. Adams County voters approved the plan in a referendum in 1989.*”

The back story of this announcement, the hidden action that produced the vote by the citizens of Adams County to approve this annexation, is one of risk taking by Roy Romer, then Governor of Colorado and James Kent Associates (JKA) leaders in the understanding of gathering places as communication centers and informal network decision making.

In Colorado there is a state law that does not allow annexation by one jurisdiction from another with out the approval of the voters of the jurisdiction from which the land is to be annexed i.e. Denver needed 40 + acres of Adam’s County land in order to have the right land base to build its then new Denver International Airport. The Governor took charge of the campaign to persuade Adams County citizens and businesses to support the annexation effort. The campaign to make this happen had spent approximately \$1.2 million in media ads, slick brochures “selling” the benefits of a new airport and the usual newspaper interviews and ads extolling the virtues of this new airport for citizens of Adams County.

Five weeks before the vote in November of 1989 Jim Kent’s phone rang and on the line was Governor Romer. He explained that the formal campaign was not going well, that if the vote were “taken today” Denver would lose by 5 points and the airport would not be built. The Governor wanted to know what could be done to turn this election around i.e. “can JKA’s informal networking abilities turn this election”. No small order when there was only 5 weeks left to get into the field. The Governor was asked for two days so a quick check on what was going on with Adams County people who would vote on this referendum could be done. Dropping into several gathering places the JKA team found what turned out to be the fatal flaw that was bringing the campaign for annexation approval down to defeat.

The people of Adams County from the brief gathering place descriptions had what is termed an imbedded issue. In the gathering place talk was the belief that *“there would be no jobs or business opportunities at DIA for Adams County people.”* This was not true but it had the characteristics of an imbedded issue--one that is re-enforced daily through trusted word-of-mouth communication. What was known was that the formal campaign could not penetrate to persuade the people that this “no jobs, no business opportunities” was “just not true”. With the information in hand the Governor was called with the following message:

“In order to turn this election around in 5 weeks, here’s what we have to do and how we are going to do it.” The Governor was told that in the next 5 weeks he would be needed every morning from 6:30am to 8:00am to visit every coffee shop in Adams County. He was to bring no paper to write on or handouts and was not allowed to use “sell” talk. He had to “listen” to the people and if he needed to draw something “draw on a napkin”. The team needed to find the issues that the people had and respond to those issues to get underneath the *“theme of non-access to jobs and businesses at DIA”*. In addition every Saturday he would work the “flea markets” to visit the booths to talk to the vendors about their issues and observations. Finally the Governor’s Mansion with Governor Romer present will be available every Sunday between 2 pm and 4 pm for all of the Barbers, Beauticians and Bartenders (The 3 Bs) to come in and talk over their concerns and issues. From the gathering places to the Mansion all of the people i.e. waitresses, vendors, and the 3 Bs were natural communicators in their respective networks and they moved information informally throughout Adams County.

As the issue got clarified in these word-of-mouth networks the new knowledge enhanced by the Governor about the fact that indeed there were “jobs and business opportunities” replaced the “myths and rumors” that the formal (and expensive) campaign could not penetrate. *In five short weeks this informal network and gathering place campaign turned the election from a sure 5 point defeat into a 4 point win.*

To this day the process is known as the “Oat Meal” circuit. The Oat Meal circuit is designed to assist local citizens to empower themselves through participating in finding the truth and facts and not be disempowered by rumors and half-truths. *The finding of truth and facts is a part of a community finding its heart and soul.* The community found on their own, through information and knowledge development, that there were opportunities that they were being deprived from taking advantage of them. Outsiders who had a corporate agenda that needed to produce a vote against the annexation for their own financial gain were the ones who planted the “rumors and half truths”. Had they prevailed in their narrow interests they would have deprived the citizens of Adams County from this great social and economic opportunity.

A side story of how the Governor worked to win the heart and soul of people at the gathering places takes place at a Café in northern Adams County where planes from one

of the runways at DIA would come close to overflying some of the land in northern Adams County. The Governor was in a booth with several people in the booth and several standing around. Kent was standing with a waitress by the counter. The Governor had been listening intently to Mildred a chicken and egg farmer in the area who was concerned about the planes flying overhead head and making noises. Here's the dialogue:

Mildred: "Governor I don't want that airport because the planes using the new runway will make so much noise that my chickens will stop laying eggs."

Governor without pausing and in the blink of an eye said: "Tell you what Mildred, if you will consider the benefits of a new airport I will talk to our College of Agriculture to see if they can breed some chickens that are deaf." Every one relaxed and had a good laugh and the Governor had several more supporters.

Kent to Waitress: "I didn't know noise affected the ability of hens to lay eggs?"

Waitress to Kent: "I don't know about that, but I do know that Mildred's chicken never did lay eggs very well, noise or no noise!"