

Conclusion

In the course of 35 years Portland rewrote the story of itself. It changed from a city in the boondocks, generating scant attention from the outside, run by a few self-selected *white guys*, with a derivative art and cultural scene, to a city that regularly claims accolades for its livability, sustainability, rich culture, and progressive politics. There have been many theories about the causes of this transformation, all with some merit, including enlightened civic and business leaders, the landscape, smart planners and planning innovations. In this book I have presented another view of Portland's evolution that highlights the critical role ordinary and extraordinary citizens have played, through a wide array of tried and true as well as novel civic institutions and practices.

It is important to understand the evolution of Portland's civic history as a story or narrative because the civic actions I have documented are not just singular acts of success (or failure) in the history of a community, but add up to a story that the citizens believe in, and that is relayed to the world that now attracts new citizens who move here because of the story.

Every community has a narrative. It may have many narratives over time, one that may even be determined by what *outsiders* say about a community. It might be a story that is self-fulfilling, damaging, limiting, expansive, or innovative. The nature of a community's story is critically important to understand when setting long-term sustainability goals. To give an extreme example, the story of Las Vegas -- the get rich, "sin city" of glamour and excess -- does not include elements of environmental

sustainability such as the carrying capacity of the Colorado River, etc. Portland's story, by contrast, even if part myth, is about environmental sustainability and public involvement. The story is a construction of social knowledge: part rational science, part experiential knowledge. A healthy civic story will lower the cost of governance by spreading the responsibility for maintaining the commons between citizens, NGOs, and the private and public sectors. Much as Native American stories taught their people about sustaining the natural world for future generations, a good community story is one that is environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable. The goal of the best kind of community story is to maintain or restore an habitation pattern that is sustainable.

Bradshaw Hovey, in an article in the journal of Utopian Studies, says that, within the planning profession, and beyond, Portland is seen as a practical demonstration of how good planning, effective citizen participation, and regional growth management can produce what is commonly referred to as a good "quality of life." While this part of the Portland story is well known, Hovey's understanding of the role of story, as a tale developed and told by the residents of a community, is important to understanding the thesis of this work. Hovey (1998) says:

It is important to keep in mind that Portland's story about itself--or any community's story about itself--is more than a concatenation of events, outcomes, and key players. In Portland's case, at least, it is also partly a myth or legend which carries a message about what kind of people Portlanders are, what the community values and what it opposes, about the right and the wrong way to do things in Portland, what it means to be a member of the community, and ultimately, what kind of a city they collectively wish to be. (p. 69)

It is important that we get the story, or history of our place, correct for the sake of the historical record, but it is also important because it provides a blueprint for how change takes place. Too often the story we know is based on regimes of electoral politics or the impact of key leaders. While these stories may have validity, they also diminish the importance of individual, lesser known citizens and the role of an active citizenry. If we collectively believe that contributions to civic life and change are implemented by leaders then we may falsely assume that power only resides in a few gifted individuals or individuals with inherited social capital or financial resources.

It is also true that without leaders, such as Neil Goldschmidt (Mayor of Portland, 1973--1979) and Tom McCall (Oregon Governor 1967—1975) these civic innovations may never have taken hold or had as much impact in the community. This points to the symbiotic relationship that exists between leaders and citizens. A healthy civic life is dependent on both.

Portland's exemplary civic path may be explained by its ability to generate civic innovations. While the civic order was in upheaval, as clearly indicated first by social movement unrest in the late 1960s and early 1970s and then by a dramatic organizational ecological shift that followed, the emergent political leadership of Portland took advantage of the rising tide of civic activism. Rather than resisting the new forms of collective behavior, they incorporated the activists into a larger civic umbrella. This study confirms Sirianni and Friedland's (2001) thesis that civic innovations in many communities around the country emerged from the initiative of state actors and were sustained through governments working with committed professional community advocates and citizen groups.

In the 1950s and before, citizen involvement in Portland meant bringing together the usual cast of elected officials and civic elite. After the reconstruction period in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Portlanders learned to expect much more—not just to elect politicians to represent their interests but to be provided the opportunity to be involved in public policy on an ongoing basis.

In 1960, the City of Portland budget reflected only one position at all involved in citizen participation, an outreach worker for the newly formed Portland Development Commission. Today public involvement is a core service of the City. The most obvious nexus is Portland's 30-year-old Office of Neighborhood Involvement. In 2002, this office had a \$8-million budget, at least \$1.2 million of which focused on direct involvement of citizens in public policy issues. But public involvement is also dispersed throughout the bureaus of the City. In one recent study conducted by the City to find ways to cut costs, 122 staff were described as public involvement positions, amounting to \$8 million in general operating fund expenditures (Brian Hoop, personal communication, January 2003).

The change agents in the late 1960s and early 1970s were not always greeted with open arms. Hundreds of activists were *stalked* by the Police Bureau's secret subversive watch program. Activist, Tom Walsh (in 1999 director of the metropolitan transit organization, TriMet) was referred to as the "king of the hippies." In the early 1970s, downtown business interests were focused on increasing parking in downtown and showed only moderate interest in plans to create Pioneer Place, a public space now thought of as Portland's living room. Likewise, civic elites like Ira Keller had little interest in preserving neighborhoods such as Lair Hill which he described as, "just

awful—like something you’d find in the Tennessee mountains. It’s worse than Albina (Urban renewal project, p.5).” At that time, in a dramatic error of judgment with cascading consequences, including the genesis of Portland’s neighborhood movement, the City and PDC did not feel compelled to have much contact with residents about the future of that neighborhood.

The transformation of civic life in Portland since the 1950s was shaped by wave after wave of challenging groups, the mobilization of constituencies that often coalesced as issue interest groups or whose agendas were institutionalized as formal government programs. At any given time, the organizational form taken by the mobilization depends on the existing civic infrastructure, the repertoire of actions that are available and effective, and the encouragement or flexibility of the established political powers. The formation of new groups to challenge the status quo or bring innovative new ideas to the forefront is an essential democratic civic act.

There are many stories throughout this study of the catalytic innovations of everyday citizens and grassroots organizations and collective actions. Portland’s citywide neighborhood system was signed into law by Mayor Goldschmidt, but it was inspired by the collective actions of countless citizens who resisted freeways and demolition of neighborhoods. Portland’s radical departure from building freeways to investing in light rail can be traced to a handful of individuals in southeast Portland who stopped the Mt. Hood Freeway. The revitalization of downtown would have played out very differently without citizens like Betty Merten, who disagreed with the business leaders in the early 1970s who wanted more parking in downtown. Without Waterfront for Citizens there might be a freeway along the Willamette River in downtown instead of

a Portland's premier civic event area, Waterfront Park. The resettlement of Portland's inner city neighborhoods, such as Irvington in northeast Portland and the Lair Hill and Corbett Terwilliger neighborhoods in southwest Portland, were first resettled in the late 1960s and 1970s by impoverished students and idealists, such as the members of Terrisquirma and The Learning Community. The creation of Portland's first community development corporations and an affordable housing movement can be traced back to a community congress organized by citizen activists. The creation of a Portland-region wide greenspaces program and the movement to restore Portland area watersheds and wetlands was initiated by activists using state-of-art computer mapping technologies and street theater actions to draw attention to the value of green infrastructure. Portland's reputation as a city with a green or sustainable development outlook can be traced to grassroots collective actions. For example, Portland's highly developed recycling programs started with the "hippie" efforts of Sunflower, Cloudburst, and Portland Recycling Team. The Pacific Northwest sustainable agriculture and natural foods movement dates back to Tilth's convocation of sustainable agricultural activists in the early 1970s. The region's movement away from fossil and nuclear fuels to soft energy options would probably not be so advanced without education and activist groups such as Rain and Sun.

Civic Infrastructure

I have examined Portland's civic history since World War II using both a chronological and thematic approach. The historical approach illuminates the decisive

moments and collective actions that created the civic Portland of today. The examination of Portland's civic infrastructure provides a way of evaluating the health of civic life. I do not contend that my analysis represents a completed theory or approach. It is a work in progress. However, some of the most important elements have been revealed.

Opportunity and efficacy

Citizens need opportunities to be involved. In Portland, the opportunities are numerous and widespread; but opportunity needs to be accompanied by investment in the human capital of citizens. If citizens have opportunity to be involved in local decision-making, planning, and public policy, but do not have civic skills and knowledge to be **effectively** involved, then the bureaucrat's nightmare of time and cost delays and policy gridlock may come to pass.

In Portland, traditional civic life declined because traditional groups either died or became irrelevant. Less than 20% of the civic groups of the 1950s were still in existence in 2000. Over time, they either failed to be inclusive, adaptive, or innovative, and, at some point, no longer served as the sources of civic skills and knowledge acquisition for citizens desiring to effectively participate in the civic life of the community.

Information, thanks to the Internet, about community affairs is much more readily available. But, information alone isn't sufficient. Citizens have to know how to use the information, and they need civic skills such as how to facilitate participatory group process, or present public testimony. Additionally, there is a values question. If citizens are empowered, for example through a structured and empowered neighborhood

involvement system such as Portland's, to represent their own self interest or only their immediate neighbors, without a broader or deeper understanding of city-wide, regional, or even global interests and perspective, then the result can be an over-articulated civic arena.

Engaged schools and universities

The civic health of a community depends on an education system that nurtures good citizens as well as wage earners. It is a public good that lowers the cost of governance. One promising direction in civic education is Portland State University's (PSU) community-based learning curriculum. Every year, 8,000 students work in the community, selecting from 1000 different community partners. At the heart of this innovative curriculum is learning, not volunteerism. When graduates of PSU are asked if they plan to continue their engagement, the strongest determinant is their sense of efficacy, i.e. whether what they did made a difference. This need for efficacy was tempered by the degree to which they felt trust in public institutions. If trust and efficacy were lacking, then students tend to look out only for themselves, leaving the work of protecting the commons to someone or something else (Morgan and Williams 2003).

Facilitative leadership style

Portland's civic renaissance was fueled by a symbiotic relationship between citizens and government. The leadership in Portland during the early 1970s, and at several points since then, has been more facilitative than paternalistic. Universities also have a key role in maintaining a healthy civic infrastructure by virtue of nurturing public servants who know how to facilitate effective citizen involvement. Today's public servants or bureaucrats need a new suite of skills and knowledge that allow them to tap the "wisdom" of citizens. Typical graduates of universities come away with specialized knowledge, but often lack the skills and knowledge to work with citizens. An engineer may know how to build a road, but not how to work with community members to build roads that meet a multitude of livability goals citizens deem important.

Civic space

Civic spaces are an extension of the community. When they work well, they serve as a stage for our public lives. If their civic role is functional, civic spaces can be the settings where celebrations are held, where exchanges both social and economic take place, where friends run into each other, and where cultures mix. When cities and neighborhoods have thriving civic spaces, residents have a strong sense of community. When such spaces are lacking, people may feel less connected to each other. If civic spaces are inadequate, civic life, including citizen participation, will suffer. If urban design emphasizes gated communities and private or semi-private spaces over public, and does not include plentiful locales where people can mix across class or cultural boundaries, then, when citizens must come together to solve community problems, it will

be much more difficult.

One Shoe Does Not fit All

In Portland there are many types of citizens, and many type of citizen-based organizations. The boundary between private citizen, NGO staff, volunteers, local government bureaucrats, and elected official, meanders. During the Popular Pluralist period, the Mayor, Bud Clark came up from the ranks as both the owner of a popular third Place, the Goose Hollow Inn, and as a board member of a neighborhood association, while the coordinator of the neighborhood district office where the Mayor lived, Margaret Strachan, became a city commissioner. The most recent female city commissioner, Amanda Fritz, got her feet wet so to speak, as a watershed restoration activist. Additionally, many of the City of Portland advocate bureaucrats were first NGO staff members or volunteers.

There are in Portland, and most any community, what I've come to call *professional citizens*, those that meander across these boundaries, and dedicate their life through paid and voluntary positions, to being effective citizen advocates. These are the citizens often appointed to advisory groups because of their high level of skill and knowledge about public processes and specialized knowledge of an issue, e.g. transportation planning, health care, etc. The commitment of these “professional” citizens is substantial. An appointment to a citizen advisory committee might last months, even years, and involve frequent meetings, a substantial commitment to learning technical information, and the willingness and ability to mediate with other stakeholders

over contentious issues. This tier of public involvement plays a vital role in the health of a community's civic life. "Professional" citizens provide knowledge and perspectives because of their day-to-day work within interest groups or NPOs that extends the capacity of local government agencies. While these citizens often provide valuable and objective information to the local public policy debate, they may also have invested interests and be a part of the establishment in ways that your average citizen are not.

Beyond the tier of the truly dedicated citizens there are *occasional citizens*, who may not have the time or dedication that professional citizens have, but are as centrally important. Their involvement in civic life is not as easily assured. To involve this broader base of citizens a community needs a constantly changing suite of public involvement processes and tools. Civic innovations, such as citizen juries, community benefit agreements, appreciative inquiries, and issues forums, need to be explored and implemented to continually involve the broader spectrum of citizens, and to keep the core of professional citizens from thinking too much alike.

The Demographics of Public Involvement

A healthy civic infrastructure also needs to make room for a variety of population groups.

The Young--Public involvement institutions and practices need to evolve to accommodate the culture of the young. The collapse of traditional civic life in Portland's history reflects this need. When the established civic institutions refused to accommodate the new ways of the young --the baby boomer "graduates" of the social

movements of the 1960s – those young people created their own institutions that, over time, replaced many of the traditional ones. These “boomer” institutions may themselves be challenged by today’s youth, especially the “digital natives” who grew up immersed in global electronic media. These digital natives may be impatient with old style face-to-face involvement such as neighborhood meetings.

Elder--At the opposite end of the age spectrum are the elders of a community, now an especially large number with the graying of the baby boomer generation who possess both wealth and slack resources. Elders need to be incorporated effectively into civic life, and efficacy is the key word here. Elders’ place at the civic table should not be a purely honorific one. As with any society, there needs to be a means to transfer wisdom. Wisdom involves a longer civic narrative timeframe that can be difficult to incorporate into everyday civic life. There is an alarming distancing of young and old activists due to the differential use of the Internet by the young and old for civic involvement.

New comers--One of the challenges for many communities, including Portland, is the inclusion of increasing numbers of newcomers from other states and nations. How can the civic narrative and infrastructure adapt to incorporate these groups? Many immigrants to the Portland area have been drawn by the story or myth that the city has created, but they may not understand the elements of this story as translated into rules, regulations, policies, and mores. Then there are the many newcomers who arrive without much knowledge at all of the prevailing narrative. In effect, the community needs a “welcome wagon” process to enroll people into the community’s storyline while also

continually adapting the storyline to new input and perspectives.

Disadvantaged--A community, like society, is, as Martin Luther King said, judged by how well it treats its most disadvantaged. The disabled, poor, and minorities demand unique and innovative venues for effective public involvement. What may be under-appreciated is just how many may see themselves as “disadvantaged.” A robust public involvement process is multi-leveled and flexible, accommodating people who are better at writing than speaking, those who think in terms of stories rather than numbers, and those who learn by doing as well as by studying manuals and policy documents.

challenging groups--One of the clear historical lessons from Portland’s civic story is that because the established order of civic institutions closed the door to young people in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the young created new civic institutions. The “insiders” did not listen to the new challenging groups, let alone learn from them or alter their institutions or civic actions. As a result, the older institutions began losing members, and the attention of the community.

Diverse population--A civic infrastructure that includes a diversity of perspectives is good and just, but there are more important reasons to advocate for diversity in public involvement venues. As Surowiecki (2004) argues in *The Wisdom of Crowds*, diversity, along with independence and decentralization, are the three basic elements that allow for the wisdom of groups to emerge. In several examples, he illustrates that groups made up of only “smart” people don’t come up with the best solutions to problems. If you

assemble a diverse group of people who possess varying degrees of knowledge, you're better off entrusting major decisions to them rather than to only one or two people, no matter how smart. The more influence we exert on each other, the more likely we will believe the same things and make similar mistakes. Diversity contributes not only additional perspectives; it is also easier for individuals to say what they truly think.

Why is it Important?

The complex suite of issues we must address to reach environmental and social sustainability at the community level necessitates a community governance structure that harnesses the wisdom of a broad cross-section of its citizens, the “wisdom of crowds, or wisdom of citizens.” Portland's civic history over the last thirty years reveals how when civic leaders and advocate bureaucrats are able to facilitate the wisdom of its citizens, a community can solve some, not all, intractable community problems. Portland's form of community governance may provide a model for the future when citizens will have to be routinely involved in creating socially and environmentally sustainable communities.

A metaphoric way of understanding this form of community governance is to think of the *hardware* and *software* components of a community. Public and private sector players have build America, at least until recently, using a hardware model, large public works enterprises, such as roads and sewers. These still need to be constructed, and engineers will still have jobs, but some of the solutions to community problems are software problems. For example, municipal waste was addressed by creating ever better

incineration technology. Today, citizen involvement in recycling is an essential part of the solution and could be called a “software” solution. Or consider the issue of stream pollution: the old government structure could deal fairly handily with “point pollution”—pollution that had a single source. One located the source and remedied the situation by working with the single polluter. Non-point pollution, by contrast, is caused by the actions of thousands of residents in a watershed. Facilitating the solution to non-point pollution requires a very different approach and leaders and bureaucrats who have the ability to facilitate collective responses. To solve community issues from a long-term sustainability perspective, then, we need to move from “hardware” to “software” solutions. Other examples would include community policing and neighborhood watch, flex car options and car pooling, tool lending libraries, and providing some forms of health through maintaining and enhancing social support networks.

Challenges for Portland

Civic life in Portland, as in most communities, is increasingly influenced by and conducted online. Citizens are also turning to the Internet to obtain government information. 97 million or 77% of internet users have gone online to search for government information and to communicate with government agencies. Portland is considered to be one of the more wired communities in the country. An August 18, 2005 front page story in *The Oregonian* reported that “Portland’s drive to take the internet out

of the office and into the streets has won a high-profile endorsement from Intel, which named the city one of America's most technologically advanced." The digital natives, those who can't remember a time without the Internet, take to the new civic life, like sixties social movements took to the street, creating blogs, online electoral and issue campaigns, and novel uses of social networking space. But, there is a considerable gap between the aging activists and the young. A difference in discourse and organizing venue that needs to be bridged.

For the health of local civic life, the Internet poses a local-to-global set of problems. As Robert Putnam noted, "Technologies like the Internet mean that our connections with people around the country and around the world are getting closer, while our ties to our neighbors across the street are weakening" (Putnam 2002). Citizens access more national news online than local, and some evidence suggests that long distance social networks are strengthened at the expense of local social networks.

In terms of the quality of democratic dialogue that takes place on the Internet, in particular in the "blog world," Stephen Bates at the Annenberg School of communication notes that the Internet prompts more knee-jerk reactions than deliberative responses. He goes on to note that "when there is more interesting discourse, you can tell it's people who just love to hear the sound of their own voices. They're not really listening to other people. It gives people a way to respond instantly and often angrily and aggressively without taking the time to mull something over."

The very nature of organizations and how individuals relate to one another is being changed by the Internet. Some trends impacting local civic life include: the fluid nature of organizational membership; an increase in intra-organizational membership;

and "membership" in organizations online that solidifies affinity groups at the expense of exposure to different perspectives. There may also be an increase of expressive forms of citizen participation at the expense of more deliberate dialogue, while at the same time individuals may gain more power as individuals and be able to foster weak ties at a distance.

Though Putnam has thoroughly documented the decline of civic life in America, it is sometimes forgotten that his critique is not solely about the declining number of citizens involved, but also the nature of that involvement. He noted that collective action has declined more rapidly than expressive forms of individual action (e.g. letter writing). "There is," he said, "more single issue blare and declining civility (Putnam 2000, p. 46)."

In the *Wisdom of Crowds*, Surowiecki (2004) points out some key distinctions between "wise" crowds and unruly mobs. It is not enough just to ask for citizens opinions; the communication process has to be structured to gain the generalized wisdom of the citizenry. We too often confuse opportunity for citizens to publicly express their opinion with true and effective citizen participation. Fortunately, there are a growing number of practitioners and theorists who are developing deliberative democratic processes to capture the wisdom of citizens. Communicative planning theory promotes citizen participation in which knowledge is socially constructed. Participatory research focuses attention on the need to include citizens early in any process when the ground rules, original questions, data selection, and analysis typically narrow the scope for participation into simplistic choices between limited number of options. Other civic process models attempt to balance power differences and make use of different types of knowledge. For example, Participatory rural appraisal--ways of utilizing local

knowledge and analyzing and including that “data” in assessments and implementations, and Beneficiary assessment – processes that focus on experience of the recipients or those effected – are two examples. Organizations such as the Kettering Foundation, Center for Deliberative Democracy, and the American Democracy Project have developed creative processes to involve citizens in substantive dialogues rather than rudimentary public processes like public hearings.

Portland has built an exceptional civic infrastructure over the last 40 years, but as the city enters the 21st century the next test will be whether the collective vision can hold steady with a more diverse population, the divisive tactics of special-interest-group politics, and a civic life that is carried out as much in the virtual blogosphere as it is in face-to-face neighborhood meetings. The ferment of civic activism of the previous generation has changed both the “vocabulary” and “grammar” of civic life—the goals and values that are commonly accepted and the ways that decisions are made. If this is true, Portland represents a challenge not only to Putnam’s thesis of a decline in civic participation but also to his worry that such declines erode the shared goals and patterns of trust that are often called “social capital.” Structural explanations do not seem to clarify Portland’s rich civic life. Portland is quite similar to Seattle, Denver, Austin, and Columbus in demographic structure and economic base, but it ends up with a very different style of public life. What does seem to account for Portland’s distinctiveness is learned behaviors. Early successful examples of participatory action encouraged other activists and bred institutions that in turn embedded and reinforced particular styles of action. In effect, Portlanders in the last 35 years have learned about the rewards and problems of active citizenship through practice. Nevertheless, the underlying challenge

for progressive Portland is whether the efflorescence of civic activism will be limited to a single generation. In places such as Birmingham and Chicago, the “civic moment” faded after a few decades as problems seemed less urgent. New groups with new issues did not find the progressive consensus open to their concerns and had little interest in celebrating past accomplishments.

Will Portland’s habits of planning and a larger habit of civic activism carry its own momentum? Will newcomers care to learn the Portland style? Can a particular political culture or style be transmitted across generations? Will the institutionalizing of activism perpetuate or dampen the fervor of reform? Is the civic infrastructure created since the 1960s robust enough to accommodate the interests and needs of a changing community? Will what Putnam calls the “Portland anomaly” fade or continue in the 21st century (Johnson and Abbot, 2003).

It is necessary to develop more effective ways of engaging people in community problem-solving in partnership with government and that requires a software solution that harnesses the wisdom of a diverse cross-section of citizens. The complex problems we seek to resolve demand “face time” that enables citizens to strengthen social capital and bridge disparate communities and perspectives. We also need to understand and access the capacities that the revolution in information technology provides. One need only spend time perusing the first encyclopedia on the planet created by everyone rather than a handful of experts – Wikipedia – to understand the potential of global “idea agoras” and “wisdom of crowd” software. Remember, on the popular television show, “So You Want to be a Millionaire?,” the audience is right 91% of the time. And the “experts?” They clock in at 65%.