

Hampton, Virginia: Civic Engagement as a Management Strategy

BY MIKE MCGRATH

Hampton, Virginia (population 136,000, elevation 10 feet) is one of the oldest English-speaking communities in the United States. Thanks to its proximity to Langley Air Force Base and the Norfolk Naval Station it has one of the highest concentrations of military veterans in the country. It is home to one of the country's oldest historically black colleges, Hampton University. The population of the city is about 50 percent African American, 43 percent white, 5 percent Hispanic, and 2 percent Asian.

Situated near three rivers that empty into the Atlantic Ocean by way of Chesapeake Bay, Hampton is at great risk of tidal flooding during storms and extended periods of rainfall, a peril that will only worsen over time, thanks to rising sea levels. Last June, the Hampton Roads Planning Commission and the Dutch Embassy held three days of workshops at a library in Norfolk, Virginia. Dutch cities obviously have a great deal of experience with the problems associated with lowland flooding, and the workshops were an opportunity for urban designers, engineers, landscape architects, planners, academics, and government officials from the Netherlands and Hampton Roads to “explore creative solutions and holistic concepts for flood risk reduction, resiliency, and smart development.”

Hampton's team included one member who wasn't an architect, an urban planner, or a government official. She was a neighborhood activist who had served on the local waterways steering committee. After the exercise was over, one of the Dutch participants told Hampton City Manager Mary Bunting they had never had an ordinary citizen in any of the groups, adding that it had worked out so well that they planned to make sure there were citizen-participants in future dialogues. “We didn't really think we were doing anything special,” she explained when interviewed recently. “That's just the way we do business.”

Government Re-Invention and Public Engagement

The City of Hampton's focus on public engagement as a management strategy can be traced back to the late 1980s when local officials were facing the possibility of a growing gap between the cost of city services and local sources of revenue. Like many other communities, Hampton's revenue base was very dependent on property taxes, and local home values were not growing at the same rate as the cost of services. Property values, in fact, were among the lowest in the region.

The city's elected leaders were understandably reluctant to raise property tax rates to compensate for the gap between tax receipts and growing city costs. Hampton has an average family income level well below the statewide average. “It's not a wealthy community,” said Bob O'Neill, a former Hampton city manager who now serves as the executive director of the International City/County Management Association. “Your margin of error is not that great, so you have to do the right things, and you have to do the right things well.”

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Hampton city officials borrowed a strategic planning model from the private sector to assess the city's organizational culture and evaluate its strength and weaknesses in the face of looming challenges and opportunities. “Those were the early days of community-based strategic planning in local government,” said O'Neill. “The mayor (James Eason) was a dynamic leader with a strong business background, so he was familiar with the process.” Adopted in 1986, the strategic plan announced a

vision of the city's future: "to bring together the resources of business, neighborhoods, community groups, and government to establish Hampton as the most livable city in Virginia."

Three years later what began as an internal process of deliberate, participatory planning broadened out into a communitywide public engagement effort. Within the community, there was strong disagreement and conflict over the transportation section of a proposed comprehensive plan, specifically a proposal to build a major east-west highway that critics said would have divided the city in two. Faced with strong opposition, O'Neill proposed to conduct a consensus-based process in which a broad group of stakeholders—including opponents and supporters of the roadway—could reach a decision on the roadway. "The council indicated that it would defer to the stakeholder group," O'Neill said, and

... that was part of the design. The process was long and exhausting but one that became the fundamental design for how decisions got made in the community in the future. It gave a huge number of who would never have engaged in a comprehensive planning process and opportunity to engage. Participation became part of the expectation of the community and part of the culture of both the community and the city staff.

Youth Engagement

In 1990, the city received a federal grant to do community-based planning on a collaborative effort to address the needs of children and young adults. The community set about engaging two groups of stakeholders, one including youth-serving organizations and another involving young people directly in the planning efforts. A year-long planning process ensued that engaged thousands of young people and youth-serving adults.

The planning group, which came to be known as the Coalition for Youth, presented the city council with a master plan identifying four strategic areas of focus—strong families, healthy neighborhoods, youth as resources (or youth civic engagement), and investments in the first two decades of life. The group's work was adopted as a component of the city's 1993 strategic plan. To implement the

plan, the city created a youth engagement division and appointed a youth commission to oversee policy. The city's focus on strategic planning, a consensus-based process to developing a master plan, and its collaborative youth program evolved into another local initiative, the creation of a network of empowered neighborhood organizations supported by Hampton's Housing and Neighborhood Division.

Neighborhood Participation

The city supports neighborhood efforts with staff consultants who work with local activists and volunteers to plan and implement neighborhood improvement projects. The city also supports these efforts with a neighborhood development fund, which has spent more than \$2 million on hundreds of projects in the city's ten neighborhood districts. Volunteers and staff also work together to leverage public sector funds with monies raised from contributions from local groups and individuals and grants from other public and private or nonprofit sector agencies. The grants to neighborhood groups range from a few thousand to tens of thousands depending on the size and scope of the project.

The funds are distributed with guidance from the Neighborhood Commission, an appointed body with about 20 or more members who meet regularly to discuss neighborhood needs and resources. Members are appointed by the city council. They include city officials, neighborhood representatives, businesses leaders, faith-based groups, school officials, and young people. Another local resource is a program known as the Neighborhood College, which provides training for developing civic leaders in the community. Dozens of new leaders graduate from the college each year, adding greatly to the capacity of local neighborhood leaders to work with the city and other partners in the community.

Government as Facilitator and Co-producer

Hampton city government, in O'Neill's words, became more than a delivery mechanism for city services. It would also be a "facilitator for development of leadership within the community." He uses the metaphor of a bank to describe the approach to governing. "If everyone makes a deposit, you have enough assets to get done what you need to get done,

but if everybody see it as a vending machine where I put my quarter called taxes and get to extract services, there's never enough resources for all the extractions. So the idea was that every neighborhood has to put something in and often it was sweat equity or leadership development or something they had to do to access resources from other parts of the city."

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For instance, a group of neighborhood leaders in the Old North Hampton section of the city formed the Coalition for Community Pride and Progress to push for a conversion of the former junior high building into a community center. The Y. H. Thomas School had been the city's only African American middle school junior high and had been attended by many students who would go on to become community leaders. In 1968, the school was closed because of de-segregation, and later, the building began to deteriorate. The coalition proposed a partnership in which the city would finance renovation of the building and the community would furnish volunteers to run the center.

The city's parks and recreation department loaned the center a staff person to teach the neighborhood volunteers how to run a community center. The old school's alumni association coordinated volunteer efforts to get former graduates of the school to volunteer as tutors, coaches, and members of the governing board. The board's members at one point included three judges, a sheriff, a city councilman, and a state delegate—all of whom had been graduates of the old junior high school.

"We put together a community work group to advise us on how they wanted us to renovate the building, so that it could be available for recreational space, and they ran it completely on volunteers after the renovation was done," said Mary Bunting, who has worked for the city in various capacities for almost 25 years. "I think we've added two staff people as the neighborhood has

aged a bit, but I'd say for the first five to ten years it was completely run by volunteers. That community center today has higher attendance than any of the publicly run community centers, and I attribute that to the community involvement. It's truly a neighborhood facility. It's owned and operated by that neighborhood, and I think they are more in touch, perhaps, with what the neighborhood needs and wants and have a higher trust level with the neighborhood than we are able to create in a citywide center."

Participatory Budgeting

When she assumed the role of city manager in 2010, Mary Bunting deepened the city's commitment to engagement in a citizen-based budgeting process that gained national recognition and acclaim in public administration circles. The city was facing a \$19 million shortfall, thanks to the Great Recession and a decline in housing values. City officials were looking at budget cuts of about 5 percent if it wanted to eliminate the gap. "I was an assistant city manager before I became manager," she said, "and one of my responsibilities was putting together the budget. We never have enough money. We had been in a stage before the recession when real estate was appreciating rapidly, but we had a council that understood that raising real estate values even with a constant tax rate would still be a higher tax bill and they didn't want people to be paying more. So we were having to roll back our tax rate and still try to do some new things that the community wanted to do. Inevitably, we were cutting. As long as I've been in the city we were cutting."

"What we would do to try to achieve that were these very analytical processes to look at costs and benefits and community impact and make recommendations about things we would trim or cut. Inevitably, we put up a series of cuts that was based on pure analytics," she said. "What happens is the council says that's fine we agree with that we'd rollout the budget, and what would happen is that the very first public hearing people—whatever we were cutting those folks would come and say, you can't cut those, that's horrible, you're hurting these people and they'd be right. It's just that the number of people impacted by these cuts would be less than other cuts."

Often the city council would relent in the face of citizen opposition, restore those items to the budget by cutting somewhere else. By this time, however, it would be too late to get public input so a new group of community members would be affected by the cuts with no opportunity to protest. “That felt like the wrong process to me, and in addition to that, there was a recession and we were going to have to make deep cuts, and I just felt that we can’t do it the same way,” she said. “I had been influenced by the culture Bob had created. Let’s try this experiment and see what people say they want to cut. So we did the whole community-based budget process and we cut even deeper than ever before but not a single person came and complained about those cuts.”

Bunting organized a comprehensive public process to engage the public in a process known as “I-Value,” relying on “social media, e-newsletters, partner organizations, and neighborhood groups, local cable interviews, paid ads, fliers, and word of mouth.” The innovative nature of the process attracted media attention, which in turn helped promote participation. Residents were asked a simple question: What do you value? “A website promoted the process and provided valuable information.

“We didn’t expect people to come just to us. We went to them, and I think that was a big part of it. You can’t just expect people to only come to government. We went to the soccer clubs, and the PTA meeting, and the Girls and Boys Scouts, anywhere anybody would take us. We set up a booth at the YMCA and the local town center. They did get to tell us what they thought was important. We just made sure we were going to touch as many people as we possibly could and every time we went to one of those places we took a recorder and a laptop and a printer.”

Community meetings were held throughout the city using keypad polling technology to get the views of residents. Transcripts of each meeting were posted within days. The manager and staff members went out to local nonprofits, schools, and clubs to discuss the budget. Online chats were held during lunch hours. Drop boxes with comment cards solicited opinions. Residents were encouraged to use the city’s exemplary 311 phone system to ask questions or voice opinions. Transcripts of the calls

were kept on file. Special meetings were held with rank-and-file city staff members to get their input. The city’s budget priorities were based on the feedback from these varied means of communicating with residents.

According to an article in the *PA Times*, “More than 2 million positive comments were received from citizens during the first campaign in 2010 with a 2,900 percent increase in attendance at public budget meetings. With the joint effort of city staff and the city manager, the entire campaign was financed with only \$860, which was used for posters, information and comment cards, reusable drop boxes, and design templates. In 2011, more than 100 citizens participated in Budget Week, a series of five formal public events which utilized audience polling. More than ten organization chats were hosted, 935 took the online polling survey, and 86 participants logged into the first online budget chat.”

“Staff worried they were going to make bad choices but most of their choices aligned with what we would have done in an analytical process,” said Bunting. “The only real difference was that citizens had been involved in the process. It made my job as manager real easy that year because I wasn’t having to struggle with the choice of cuts that had worse impact. I think it made the council’s life easier because they didn’t have people screaming at them about cuts. We ended up in the place we probably would have ended up in largely; anyway I think there were only two things that stood out. We had been prepared to cut library hours and the community was completely opposed to that, so we didn’t.”

The process worked so well, the city has used it every year since. The number of participants increased each year. The first year, more than 1,000 people were actively involved. The second, 1,500. The third, more than 2,000. Online polling participation doubled from the first year one to the third year. The city’s social media reach had grown, and there were more online chats and YouTube videos. “We had none of the controversy and you would think we would have more given the deep nature of the cuts. Even when we raised the tax rate. We gave so much communication and involvement that the community supported a tax rate increase, which

was rather large, and every (city council) incumbent who ran for reelection (one moved and thus did not run)—got reelected the next time they ran.”

Observations

Few cities have incorporated the values of civic engagement and collaboration into their organizational cultures as thoroughly and explicitly as Hampton, and the commitment to this way of doing business seems to be shared among local elected officials, public managers, and members of the community. One factor that may help explain why Hampton has embedded engagement into its culture is the stability and continuity of the city’s top managerial leadership. With one exception, all of Hampton’s city managers since Bob O’Neill had served under O’Neill in various capacities. So all of them were well versed in the culture of collaboration and engagement that he and the city’s elected leaders and neighborhood activists helped forge. (The one manager who had not been an assistant city manager was an interim appointee, and he had been involved in engagement strategies in a nearby community.) “In Hampton,” said Mary Bunting, “there’s been a special attention to cultivating and continuing this engagement culture. All of the managers who have served since Bob, worked for Bob. We were all part of creating our engagement strategy.

Both O’Neill and Bunting agree that capacity building through such avenues as the Neighborhood College, youth advisory boards, and the Neighborhood Commission have helped the city maintain and expand its commitment to civic engagement. “If you think about the world today, given the problems that federal and state governments have, the pressures on communities to decide what’s important and how it gets financed and who does it is going to be increasingly an issue that communities are going to have to wrestle with,” said O’Neill. “There’s only one way of doing it effectively and that’s through a significant amount of engagement, whether it’s through a budgeting process or through a planning process or through all of the above. In some way, you are not going to be successful unless you can figure out a good way of doing that.”

“We play a convening role,” explained Bunting.
“That’s the best way I can describe it. What we

do if we see a gap in the community that isn’t being addressed, we have the power to convene.” Bunting said citizens are usually “delighted to get calls or a letter from city officials” asking for their assistance in addressing a local challenge. “It recognizes that they have inherent skills and talents to bring to the table.”

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The City of Hampton is unusual also in the extent to which it has incorporated the values of civic engagement and cross-sector collaboration into its organization structure. It was one of the first American cities to create an official “neighborhood services” division (now known as the Neighborhood Office) to provide support to neighborhood groups and citizen activists. The city’s focus on youth development and participation has also been incorporated in government structure through its Youth Commission and “youth planners” hired by the Planning Department to work 15 hours a week in two-year terms.

Local government engages in a regular engagement process to update what it now calls its Community Plan, a combination of its strategic plan and its comprehensive plan. In 2010, the city held a community kickoff meeting attended by 240 citizens. Ten strategic areas were identified and ten community focus groups were formed to address these areas. Each focus groups had anywhere from ten to 20 citizen members with support from a staff convener, a facilitation team, and a panel of experts from the city and outside organizations. Most of the groups met every two weeks or so for a period of about three months. In March, they presented their ideas at another citywide meeting. A final community “checkpoint” meeting was held to get feedback from the community and make final changes. Eventually, the themes that emerged through this public process was adopted by the planning commission and the city.

Arguably, the integration of engagement can be seen through the unusual interchangeability of leadership roles in the community. The current mayor, for example, used to be a Hampton city manager. An elected member of the city council began as a neighborhood activist. Another council member is a former city budget director. A former mayor at one time served as director of economic development. “Because of the level of engagement, years after their paid positions, they were encouraged to

do that because they were seen as extraordinary leaders,” explained Bob O’Neill. “Some of this is the result of the kind of processes that we put in place that gave them a different and more visible role than staff ordinarily play.”

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