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A Point of View from Newport, Va.

Teresa McCoy Hypes

As a citizen of Giles County, Virginia, in the community of Newport, I have watched as county leaders have wrestled with such tough public issues as economic development, waste management, education, and transportation. I have also participated in addressing some of these issues. As is probably true for you and your locality, I have seen both successes and failures in Giles.

One success was the effort to attain the Virginia Department of Economic Development's certified business community status. I chaired the Giles County Quality of Life Committee, charged with assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the county. Other committees developed marketing materials and worked to secure industrial sites. Altogether, dozens of citizens were involved in these committees' work. This collaborative, county-wide effort was rewarded when a delegation of citizens from Giles County traveled to Richmond in 1991 to accept our county's designation as a certified business community.

Now, consider a not-so-successful local effort. Like many other rural counties, Giles has seen a decline in its youth population and has been faced with closing and consolidating schools. In 1990, the school board and board of supervisors devised a plan to consolidate the county's two high schools and establish a middle school. Many citizens were caught unaware of the proposed plan and were opposed to merging the two high schools. They stopped the proposal, but unfortunately plans to establish a middle school--favored by many of the same people who opposed the high school merger--were also thwarted.

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Why should you be interested in these two contrasting events in the life of a small, rural county far from the halls of Congress, of the General Assembly, and probably of your own home? They show that localities such as Giles, for all of their apparent remoteness, are part of a nationwide issue: How can interested citizens have a more effective voice in government and in setting the public policies that shape their communities? This question is as old as democracy. I offer no final answers in this article, but I hope that, from my Giles County point of view, I can provide some insight and stimulate some thinking.

Barriers to Engaging Citizens in Policy Making

For many public officials, both elected officials and career civil servants, just the mention of a public meeting, forum, or hearing brings fears of angry citizens storming city hall or the county courthouse. On the other side, citizens often suspect that public hearings or meetings are simply formalities that officials go through because of legal requirements and that the "real" decisions have already been made. These fears and suspicions are not unfounded: In Giles, for example, public meetings about various issues have at times ended with almost everybody--citizens, administrators, and elected leaders--angry, frustrated, dissatisfied, and, worst of all, polarized.

What sets public officials and citizens up for such frustration? I see two basic causes: first, the complexity of today's society and its problems; and second, the failure of our ways of viewing government and citizenship to keep up with social and cultural changes. Let's look more closely at both ideas.

•**The problems are tough!** Problems or issues at the local level are often as complex and technical as those at the state and federal levels. More and more problems--such as waste management and landfills,

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water quality, locations of highways and power lines--are appearing at the local level as the state and federal governments shift decision making and responsibility downward. Making matters worse, many of these problems seem to have no answer that will satisfy everyone.

Michael Harmon and Richard Mayer, in their 1986 book *Organization Theory for Public Administration*, provide some insight into why today's public issues can be so tough. They maintain that "...the kinds of problems that professionals in government were traditionally hired to deal with have in large part been solved--the roads are paved, the houses built, the sewers connected" (p. 9). These are "tame" problems, ones that have clear boundaries and definitions and involve largely technical questions. In the last few decades, however, public administrators and citizens have been faced with a new kind of problem--the "wicked" ones. "These are problems with no solutions, only temporary and imperfect resolutions. They deal with the location of a freeway, the development of school curriculum, the confrontation with crime..." (p. 9).

Giles County has had its own share of "wicked" problems. For example, in 1994 the landfill had to be closed, leaving administrators and elected leaders with the difficult decision, faced by many localities, of whether to build a new landfill, privatize the service, or send trash to another locality. The county has been faced with two other big environmental and economic issues, as well: the potential location of a power line and of an interstate highway. Both issues, involving complicated interaction among regional, state, and national parties, remain undecided.

The old ways don't always work so well anymore! Many officials, as well as citizens, tend to see citizens as simply "clients" who will have something *done to them or for them*, rather than as partners collaborating in joint decision making. David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, in their popular book *Reinventing Government*, argue that "we let bureaucrats control our public services....We rely on professionals to solve problems, not families and communities...." (p. 51). The authors maintain that Americans hunger for more control of "matters that directly affect their lives" (p. 74).

Moreover, it is no longer enough to include a few citizens on a panel here or a study committee there. Our society is diverse, and many new voices are demanding to be heard. In *Gender Images in Public Administration: Legitimacy and the Administrative State*, Camilla Stivers argues that public administrators are needed "who rather than seeing their own knowledge as preeminent believe that all parties to the situation at hand--clients, citizens, other workers--have perspectives that are necessary parts of the whole..." (p. 131). Speaking to public administrators, she contends that our image of leadership needs a place for "agency clients, citizens, secretaries, and clerks" (p. 134).

"Stakeholders" is the current term for the people affected by a decision or policy. Today, the stakeholders in public policy are more diverse, more knowledgeable, and more vocal than ever before. And when the stakeholders affected by public policy are not involved in developing that policy, the stage is set for gridlock. Barbara Gray, in *Collaborating: Finding Common Ground for Multiparty Problems*, points out the danger: "...[O]ur current problem-solving models frequently position participants as adversaries, pit them against one another, and leave them to operate with an incomplete appreciation of the problem and a restricted vision of what is possible" (p. xvii).

A failure to involve the stakeholders early in the process plagued the high school consolidation proposal in Giles County. Conflict developed among the county's three magisterial districts. A win-lose, rather than win-win, situation developed, because there existed no commonly held vision of the desired quality and structure of the county educational system.

Finding a Way Through the Barriers

I have no perfect formula for communities to broaden participation by their citizens in government and policy making. Ultimately, individual communities and citizens have to develop their own processes for involvement. But one essential ingredient is having *meaningful* opportunities for citizens to be involved. For many communities, having such opportunities may mean looking at leadership in a different way.

Camilla Stivers, for example, has suggested a new way to look at leadership. Seeing leadership differently, she suggests, might involve a leader in a coordinator role, with that position being rotated among members of a group. Rather than seeing the leader as the person at the top of a pyramid, he or she (or they) could be viewed as at the center of a network of people with various responsibilities.

I have seen an example of shared leadership in my community of Newport, where citizens decided to administer the community through a "village" format. We now refer to our community as the Village of

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Profile of Giles County

Giles County was organized from Craig, Montgomery, Tazewell, and Wythe Counties in 1806. The county was named for William Giles, governor of Virginia from 1827-1830. There are five incorporated towns in the 362-square-mile county: Glen Lyn, Narrows, Pearisburg (the county seat), Pembroke, and Rich Creek (Table 1).

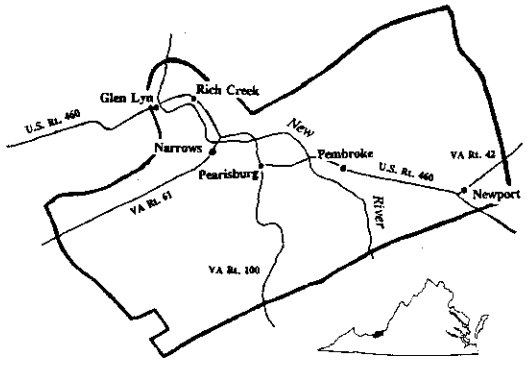
Table 1. U.S. Census counts for Giles County and its incorporated towns.

Locality	1980	1990
Giles County	17,810	16,366
Narrows	2,516	2,082
Pearisburg	2,128	2,064
Pembroke	1,302	1,064
Rich Creek	746	670
Glen Lyn	235	170

The county is located in the Valley and Ridge physiographic region of Virginia, with an elevation range from 4,348 feet at Bald Knob Mountain down to 1,470 feet at the New River. The New River Valley is both the geographic and population center of the county, with all five incorporated towns located within the Valley and along U.S. Route 460. The combination of mountains and scenic river valley make the county a popular location for outdoor recreation. Pearisburg, for example, is located along the Appalachian Trail, one of only two such towns in the United States.

Per capita income in Giles County in 1991 was $15,029, compared to the Virginia statewide level of $20,046. Employment in the county is dominated by manufacturing, with over 36 percent of employed workers in the county as of 1990, compared to 15 percent statewide in that year. A principal employer is Hoechst Celanese, whose cigarette-fiber plant in Narrows employs over 1000 people.

Figure 1. Giles County, Virginia.



Information sources: *Virginia Statistical Abstract*, 1994-95 edition, and the Giles County Chamber of Commerce.

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Newport, and a village council is active. The council is composed of representatives of various groups, civic associations, and churches, as well as individuals representing other stakeholders, such as Newport's youth.

The village council works to promote public dialogue by convening citizens when a public issue affecting the community arises and when discussion is needed to gauge community sentiment. For example, when the county board of supervisors was engaged in deciding what to do with the county's solid waste after the landfill closed, the village council held a forum with the supervisors to discuss the options and voice Newport citizens' concerns. The council has also hosted our area's U.S. Representative to discuss issues affecting the region, such as a high-voltage power line proposed to cross through the area. The Newport village council helps the citizens in our small community find their public voice, and have that voice be heard. This is no small accomplishment.

Conclusion

In a speech to the National Press Club on February 9, Senator Bill Bradley of New Jersey said, "Above all, we need to understand that a true civil society in which citizens interact on a regular basis to grapple with common problems will not occur because of the arrival of a hero. Rebuilding civil society requires people talking and listening to each other, not blindly following a hero." Citizens, elected leaders, and public administrators in Giles County are faced not only with complex, "wicked" problems, but with figuring out how to talk constructively with one another. They'll have to do so, because there are no heroes on the horizon.

References and Further Reading

Gray, Barbara. *Collaborating: Finding Common Ground for Multiparty Problems.* Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1989.

Harmon, Michael M. and Richard T. Mayer. *Organization Theory for Public Administration.* Scott, Foresman, & Co., Glenview, IL, 1986.

Osborne, David and Ted Gaebler. *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector.* Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA, 1992.

Stivers, Camilla. *Gender Images in Public Administration: Legitimacy and the Administrative State.* Sage, New York, 1993.

CORRECTION

In the January/February 1995 issue of *Horizons* ("Virginia's Farm Wineries"), the map showing the location of Virginia's farm wineries indicated one winery in Patrick County. That winery, Chateau Morrisette, does have its postal address in Meadows of Dan, which is in Patrick County, but the winery itself is located in neighboring Floyd County.

NOTICES

**Pollution Prevention Virginia* is a quarterly newsletter published by the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality's Office of Pollution Prevention. The newsletter focuses on successful examples of pollution-reducing activities by business, industry, and consumers. The Office also operates a clearinghouse that makes available pollution-prevention publications, such as *A Primer for Financial Analysis of Pollution Prevention Projects* and *The Consumer's Handbook for Reducing Solid Waste*. For more information, contact OPP, VA DEQ, P. O. Box 10009, Richmond, VA 23240-0009; phone (804) 762-4384.

**Economic Impacts: What an Impact Statement Says* is a 16-page booklet that explains the basics of economic impact studies. The booklet discusses types of data, methods used to assess impact, and commonly used terms (such as "multipliers" and "leakage"). As the booklet emphasizes, this guide is designed for citizens and local officials who find themselves "coping with change." The publication is available for $1.50 from the Western Rural Development Center, 307 Ballard Extension Hall, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR 97331-3607; phone (503) 737-3621.

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