

# Serving customers or engaging citizens: What is the future of Local Government?

## Frank Benest

When I started my local government career 30 years ago as a junior recreation leader, I knew what my job was. It was a simple, straightforward job of delivering services to the community. If the job changed, an orderly process for implementing that change was explained, and the adjustment was made.

Now that I am a city manager, however, I am confused-not only about the nature of my job but about the very business of local government. The confusion stems from the incredibly different realities now facing cities and counties as we approach the third millennium.

## A Brave New World

What does today's perplexing external environment look like? This brave new world has five characteristics:

1. Problems facing local government are complex and difficult to solve. For example, no one can cite the one definite cause of community violence, or for that matter of poverty, neighborhood deterioration, or why Johnny cannot read. These types of contemporary problems are qualitatively more complex than the engineering issues once facing cities and suburbs as they grew up in decades past.
2. No one agency, including government, can solve the problems. No one agency can deal with family dysfunction or the loss of jobs. Every, worthwhile effort requires collaboration and partnering among organizations, thus deepening the complexity. Moreover, even with collaboration, the best that can be expected is to effectively address, not to solve, the problems.
3. Local government does not have the financial resources to solve problems. Most local governments today are lucky if they have the funding simply to maintain current levels of core services. No one expects additional funding to address the social and economic problems confounding our communities. Of course, a major part of this fiscal dilemma is the shifting of costs from federal and state government to local government, giving us the legal responsibility, to address the issues, but without adequate resources.
4. Citizens have lost confidence in all institutions, including local government. In the past, people had less confidence in federal and state government but trusted local government because it was "closer to the people." Disenchantment with all major institutions, particularly government, now affects local government as well. In fact, as Chris Gates, president of the National Civic League, has observed, people's presumption of "bad intent on the part of elected officials undercuts their ability to exert leadership in solving community problems.
5. The monopoly is dead. Local governments have believed traditionally that they had a monopoly on certain service areas. They are, however, discovering that people have a multiplicity of choices. Certainly, city and county recreation departments have long competed with boys' and girls' clubs, YMCAs and YWCAs, private health clubs, and other forms of privately provided leisure activities. But now, even in the area of public safety, localities no longer have monopoly control. Because public police agencies have priced themselves out of the market, businesses and organizations now hire private security services, which have seen phenomenal growth in the last decade.

Local governments also compete in a marketplace as they attempt to retain and attract residents,

businesses, shoppers, tourists, utility and transit users, service customers, and arts patrons. Public agencies compete for people's cooperation and political support, whether that support involves complying with codes, conserving water, or paying, higher trash fees. Realistically, local government cannot force people to do anything unless they are willing to comply. Because citizens are bombarded with communications from all sources, local governments must vie for their attention. Cities and counties literally must compete on a daily basis for people's hearts and minds.

### **Vending Machine versus Barn Raising**

To evaluate the future of local government, we will have to contrast two concepts of government: the "vending machine" versus "barn raising." The vending machine (a metaphor articulated by Rick Cole, former mayor of Pasadena, California) is the traditional concept of government as a service provider. The vending machine is somewhat mysterious: people do not know precisely how it works. They drop in 25 cents in taxes or fees and expect the machine to dispense at least 25 cents in services. When the machine does not work to everyone's expectations, people start cussing at it and kicking it. Sound familiar?

Now, certainly we in government need to enhance customer service. Because we all perceive the need to improve the vending machine, local government agencies in the United States and around the world are involved in initiatives to improve customer service, ranging, from hiring customer-sensitive employees, giving existing employees better training, streamlining procedures, cutting red tape, and recognizing customerservice heroes and heroines as role models. In the community of Brea, California, for example, we take great pride in the Brea Customer Care Commitment.

Even when the city does in fact provide excellent customer service, however, there is a fundamental problem. Ultimately, the vending-machine model undermines people's confidence in and their allegiance to government. Local government becomes just another service provider among many. It is no longer special and can no longer demand the public's allegiance. Even more troublesome, the vending machine contributes to passive consumerism. Localities demand nothing more than that customers drop their quarters into the vendingmachine slot. Customers (as opposed to true citizens) only care about their needs and the services they consume. they have no interest in the needs of others. In short, local governments have turned citizens into mere consumers.

Finally, the vending machine is based on a deficit model. Localities assume that something is wrong with people or that they have some kind of deficit. By providing services, government tries to fix people. When teenagers run away from home, for example, government tries to fix them or their parents by providing shelter or family counseling. If a neighborhood complains of graffiti or gangs, local government responds to this deficit with more police.

As opposed to the vending-machine idea, the barn-raising concept (a metaphor developed by Daniel Kermmis in *Community and the Politics of Place*) suggests other possibilities for government. In an agrarian society, no one family can raise a barn. So they call on their neighbors from miles around. To raise the barn, someone hammers; another holds the ladder; and someone else brings the food. Everyone has his or her contribution to make.

The barn-raising approach promotes citizen responsibility as opposed to the passive consumption of services. When confronted with a problem, people do not ask, "What is government going to do for us?" Rather, they focus on "What are we going to do?"

As opposed to the deficit model, barn raising is based on an asset model, as described in John McKnight's 1993 publication *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Towards Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*. To better use the assets of young people, for example, the city of Brea conducts

Volunteens, a summer program that provides a small stipend to teenagers who deliver recreation and other organized programs to children, other teens, and seniors. The Volunteens program builds on the talents and energies of teenagers, not on their problems.

Likewise, in trying to help families who live in poorer neighborhoods, a local government should try to recognize and take advantage of these residents' strong sense of family and support for each other, as shown by the mothers who look after each other's children in front of apartment complexes. Governments also should build on people's faith in religion and ties to the church, should use the organizational abilities they exhibit when they organize block parties or fiestas, and otherwise should build on their sense of community. These are all tremendous assets.

#### **Four Illustrative Strategies**

While local government never will abandon completely its service-delivery or vending-machine role, managers need to confront their brave new world with more collaborative problem-solving approaches. The barn-raising concept encompasses many kinds of strategies. To illustrate the approach, let us review quickly four strategies that fit the model:

##### **1. Visioning**

Typically, local governments try two extreme approaches in dealing with the community. At one extreme is the "tell-and-sell" mode, which involves no real community participation at all. After local government agencies have made a decision, they try to sell it, often with little success and much negative reaction and mistrust in the decision-making process.

At the other extreme of the continuum of community participation is the involvement of people in Mundane technical planning, such as the update of a General Plan element. At the beginning of the process, energized and motivated city council-appointed residents and businesspeople may attend monthly meetings. After six months of dealing with mindnumbing technical minutiae, however, everyone is bored and drops out.

Visioning is a barn-raising strategy that truly engages people in expressing what they know best: their values, hopes, and fears. Once people have articulated their aspirations, the technical people can develop a plan or write the details of a program based on citizens' values and dreams. Brea has used a visioning process called Brea by Design, engaging 125 community designers', in creating a vision for the new downtown. Based on the values and concerns raised by a cross section of residents and businesspeople, the city is redeveloping its downtown as everyone's "second neighborhood" with the full support of the community. As urban planner Michael Doyle has asked, "How can people act in the interest of the whole, if it isn't well-defined, beautiful, and ennobling?"

##### **2. Developing Community Leadership**

In Iowa's 1995 general elections, no one filed to run for the office of mayor in 131 cities. Eighty one council seats in that same election attracted no candidates.

Likewise, public officials in southern California long have lamented that well-meaning, talented people are not stepping forward to take on leadership roles. In response to this leadership crisis, Brea and four other communities in North Orange County and Diamond Bar in Los Angeles County joined forces to form the North Orange County Leadership Institute. Coordinated by California State University at Fullerton, the nine month program aims to identify, train, and energize potential community leaders who can take on leadership positions on school boards and city Councils, as well as in PTAs, church groups, business associations, and civic improvement committees of all kinds. The institute has just graduated its first class of 25 community leaders.

Without community leaders, local governments have no one with whom to work. Leadership

development must be a priority in building a civic infrastructure and addressing intractable community problems.

### **3. Working Through Mediating Institutions**

As the survey results on confidence in institutions indicates, people have greater trust in churches, schools, and voluntary civic organizations than in local government. Schools, religious organizations, and other voluntary groups can mediate between government and the people. Given this potential mediating role, it makes sense for local government agencies to form partnerships with voluntary community organizations.

A good example of such a partnership is the collaboration between city redevelopment agencies and Habitat for Humanity, a nonprofit Christian ministry that helps low-income families build their own houses with community support. Redevelopment agencies often offer free land, and Habitat for Humanity engages churches, businesses, civic groups, and literally thousands of people in these "home raisings." Through these relationships with mediating institutions, local government can solve problems, promote citizen responsibility, and build trust in the government partner.

### **4. Empowering Neighborhoods**

While people do not trust government, the survey on confidence in institutions suggests that citizens most trust people like themselves: their friends, neighbors, and associates. Consequently, many local governments have focused on neighborhood empowerment strategies to solve difficult community problems.

Some local governments have tried to co-locate different programs in neighborhood recreational centers or storefronts and have established multidepartmental, cross-functional "strike teams" to address neighborhood crime or blight. These efforts, however, are essentially new and improved models of the vending machine.

A barn-raising approach requires significant outreach and building of rapport with individuals, families, and groups in a targeted neighborhood. In the process, local government identifies neighbors with special abilities, talents, energies, and other assets to contribute. Local government agencies support associations or help form new groups, and encourage existing or potential leaders to provide direction. Groups are then engaged in discussing concerns and approaches to neighborhood problems. Local government agencies are involved as catalysts or facilitators and commit resources; neighborhood groups, however, are the critical actors.

Building on residents' relationships with their neighbors, people are engaged in block parent, cleanup, and mentoring projects. Local governments also are helping neighborhood groups to take back recreation areas from gangs and drug dealers. They even are providing these recaptured playgrounds, as well as financial grants, to neighborhood groups so that they can start and schedule their own programs for their children.

To fully use the assets of local groups in different neighborhoods and to promote self-help and neighborhood-to-neighborhood cooperation, Hampton, Virginia, has created a Neighborhood Resource Bank. Under this program, which is coordinated by the city, neighborhoods can use the resource bank to combat their own local problems only if they replenish the bank with some other talent, skill, or asset. Finally, neighborhoods need to look beyond their own interests. Chris Gates has talked about the need to overcome "civic cocooning," the tendency of people who may be concerned about issues in their own neighborhood but not in the one next door. Consequently, many local governments have organized periodic neighborhood congresses so that a larger perspective of the public good can be achieved.

## **New Functions for Government Leaders**

How can elected officials, managers, and program staff solve problems, promote citizen responsibility, and regain people's confidence? Leaders must forgo the temptation to identify and analyze community problems and then organize service programs. To promote a vital civic society, leaders must adopt some of the following roles:

- Educate, educate, educate. If citizens do not confront the same "brave new world" as their local government officials, people will continue to assume that government can solve all their problems and thus will go on being disappointed. Consequently, leaders must educate people regarding new realities using many different opportunities, including state-of-the-community addresses, newsletter articles, interviews, presentations to civic groups, and remarks at city council or board meetings. In the process, leaders must understand that educating is also learning; it is a two-way process. To engage in dialogue, not monologue, leaders must listen as well as talk. In the process they revise their own perceptions of the brave new world.
- Create a new mission for local government. The core business of localities is solving problems, not delivering services. Providing services is a good role for local government, but it is only one aspect of a total problem-solving approach that must engage citizens to be effective.
- Convene stakeholder groups in creative ways to confront problems. Government leaders must avoid "rescuing" people. Rather than relieving people of their civic responsibilities, government leaders need to stimulate public discourse about concerns and to encourage brainstorming about alternative solutions. Creative strategies for engaging citizens in such discussions include visioning workshops, design competitions, charrettes, and problemsolving "festivals."
- Stimulate discussion on values, aspirations, and fears. Instead of discussing technical solutions, government officials must encourage people to articulate their values and to envision possibilities for the future.
- Identify what local government can contribute. In promoting problem solving with people, as opposed to delivering services, the local government agency also must contribute resources. These contributions might include expertise, skills, facilities, training programs, seed grants, and coordination.
- Forge collective action. After helping to identify community concerns and stimulating public dialogue, government leaders must promote collective action. Everyone has civic responsibilities. Everyone contributes in different ways.
- Build confidence. Unfortunately, tearing down city hall has become an acceptable way for local officials to pander to the citizens who distrust or feel disdain for government. If those who have been elected or appointed focus on government as the problem, government will lose its capacity to help solve problems. If officials empower people and become their partners, however, citizens will regain their confidence in themselves and in government.

## **Rediscovering Citizenship**

The future for local government lies in transforming passive consumers of public services into responsible citizens. Because of the complexity of the problems facing communities, many people sullenly withdraw from the political process and from their civic responsibilities. They make unrealistic demands on local government, ignoring any need for common sacrifices; or they seek out heroic rescuers like Ross Perot or Colin Powell. Local government can help people rediscover their lost sense of responsible citizenship. Citizenship is not limited merely to voting in periodic elections. Even when individuals do not have a personal stake, active citizenship requires them to:

- Inform themselves on key issues confronting their communities.
- Participate in civic improvement groups.
- Struggle to find common ground with others, as well as advocate their private interests.
- Become responsible for their local governments and their communities.

Yes, local government faces a brave new world. Ultimately, cities and counties cannot govern and cannot solve complex problems if people are merely passive consumers. Local governments do have a vital future, however, if they can reconceptualize their role in engaging people as responsible citizens.

Frank Benest is the city manager for Palo Alto, California. This article was originally published as part of a special insert in the International City/County Management Association Journal, November, 1996.

Editor's note: The ICMA is the professional organization of city managers. Activists will find it useful to quote from ICMA publications when they encounter we-know-best city staff and city politicians. Start off with something like, "I'm sure you will remember the article in the last month's International City/County Management Association Journal . . . "

Further Editor's note: Since we made this suggestion the ICMA has made its online journal available to "members only". But the ICMA has an online bookstore with lots of inexpensive books. Activists can quote from these with equal effect.