

Getting Power by Giving It Away

by Otis White

Delray Beach is a small city on Florida's Atlantic coast, not far from West Palm Beach. There are 50,000 residents — and 65 neighborhood associations. There are also 17 community advisory boards and another dozen or so business groups and task forces. If your neighborhood or interest group doesn't have an association, the city of Delray Beach will send over a community development specialist to help organize one.

No, city leaders aren't crazy. They've merely discovered that the more organized their citizens are — and the more intimately they're involved in community problem-solving — the more progress the city makes. Delray Beach uses these associations to work on community problems. And Delray has made a lot of progress in the past decade, from restoring its downtown, to bolstering its schools, to turning around its racial problems. In 1993, it was named an All-America City by the National Civic League.

Delray Beach isn't the only place where a link has been found between government effectiveness, economic development, quality of life, and citizen participation. Robert D. Putnam, a Harvard political scientist, recently completed a study of local governments in Italy. His conclusion: The more citizens interact with one another and the government as citizens and equals, not clients, the healthier the community and stronger the government.

There's an important lesson here for planning commissioners. By itself, a planning commission has limited powers. But allied with an involved and supportive community, its powers can be enormous.

How do you create that kind of support?

One way is by doing something that, at first blush, seems to make you weaker: Giving your limited powers away — to groups formed to solve problems. Consider it an investment. You're lending your authority to groups in order to get something in

return: their judgment and the public's support.

This is difficult for many officials to accept. They feel it's their job to represent the public and make decisions. They're right, of course. For the vast majority of decisions, it's better for public officials to use their own judgment.

THE BEST PEOPLE
TO HAVE ON ANY
PROBLEM-SOLVING
PANEL ARE THOSE
MOST AFFECTED BY
THE PROBLEM.

But for a few problems, particularly those where interest is high but limited to an area or group, lending your authority will work magic. Those you enlist will become invested in the solution, public confidence will grow, and you will likely wind up with a better solution.

Careful, though. Just bringing in a group of people and handing over your authority won't bring good results. You must have a clearly defined problem, a well-thought-out system and a grasp of practical psychology. From the successful communities I've looked at, here are four important elements:

- *Find the right people.* This is critical. The best people to have on any problem-solving panel are those most affected by the problem. If it's downtown renewal, then it's the landowners, merchants, office tenants, and residents. Then add people who are interested in the problem — or can bring important resources.

- *Get the group organized.* First, have a clear, specific goal. For example: "We want you to figure out how to deal with traffic flow downtown." Second, keep the members focused on choices. As public opinion

expert Daniel Yankelovich points out, most people's first instinct is to say yes to everything. By focusing on choices and their consequences, you work against that tendency. Third, highlight the underlying values in the choices. This is why citizen panels are so important. They don't bring technical expertise — your professional planners have that — but they do bring value judgments. If changing the traffic flow helps businesses, but hurts residents, that's a value judgment. Your panel should understand the values behind the choices and apply them intelligently.

- *Give them the problem.* Tell them that, unless they come back with something illegal or unethical, you'll stand behind their judgments. Is this a test of faith? Yes, but a necessary one. If you don't demonstrate your faith, you're most likely to get back what you put in. Nothing.

- *Make everyone's role clear.* Your job, as the planning commission, is to focus the panel's attention on choices. Professional planners are there to spell out the consequences of those choices. The citizens are there to make the choices. Each is an important role. Do any of them poorly, you'll get poor decisions.

Make no mistake. Building this kind of public support is a lot of work, and it requires faith in democracy and common sense. But as Bob Trescott, coordinator of the Florida Main Street Program, is fond of saying, "To get power, you have to give it away." And compared to what comes back, it's a good investment. ♦

Otis White is editor of *Community Leadership Quarterly*, a newsletter about civic leadership skills, and president of *The Consensus Group*, a firm that helps governments, non-profits and corporations build public support for new projects and initiatives. He can be reached at: P.O. Box 1687, Decatur, Georgia 30031-1687; (404) 371-9534.

