What We Can Learn From Attempts to
Involve the Public in the Public Budgeting Process

Joe Ohren and Jeffrey Bernstein

One of the most difficult tasks local governments face today is involving citizens in government decision making. Linked to a lack of involvement are the problems of disengagement and distrust of government. The general public maintains its position as "we" and that of the government as "they" when discussing political issues.

In 1997, a public opinion poll indicated that more than 75 percent of Americans had little or no confidence in the ability of their local governments to resolve problems, with even larger percentages having no confidence in the ability of state or federal government to resolve those issues that affected their lives.

The Kettering Foundation has concluded that Americans are not apathetic about political and economic decisions; they just don't feel they have any control over the decision-making process. In their book Congress as Public Enemy: Public Attitudes Toward American Political Institutions, researchers John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse agree; they argue that citizen anger toward political institutions reflects anger at the processes these institutions-particularly Congress-use.

Quite apart from the policies generated by these political institutions, citizens resent the debate, bargaining, and compromise that are inevitable parts of policy making in a democracy. When public debate turns to angry name calling and political posturing, citizens lose respect for their leaders and for the decisions they make.

One way to combat public mistrust at the local level is for elected officials to bring people and organizations together and help them understand how they all add up to the "constituency of the whole." In this way, local elected officials can plant seeds for sustained communitywide collaboration and for greater citizen involvement in government. This will require building a framework within which people can understand the relationship between citizens and government, plus inviting citizens to be part of the decision-making process.

Over the past three years, the city of Ypsilanti in Washtenaw County, Michigan, has sought to involve citizens in one of the most important decision-making processes in government, that of the budget. Two different approaches have been used, each involving collaboration between the city government and Eastern Michigan University; the efforts were designed to "educate" as well as involve citizens in decision making in a meaningful way.

This article describes the two related projects in Ypsilanti and suggests some lessons that might be of interest to those who want to become involved in such efforts. The focus in describing the projects is on the approach used to bring about citizen involvement, rather than on the results of these efforts.

Focus Groups
During a planning retreat in late 1996, the Ypsilanti City Council committed itself to "create an environment in local government where communication and information [are] shared" ("Goals" section of the "Manager's Budget Message," 1997-1998 Resource Allocation Plan). In response to discussions between the city manager and staff from the Institute for Community and Regional Development (ICARD) at Eastern Michigan University concerning the council's goal and intended strategies, a proposal was submitted and ultimately approved by the manager and council.

The proposal was designed to foster discussion among city residents about the city's budget problems and to secure feedback from a sample of citizens concerning a small number of budget or policy challenges confronting the city. The project aimed at linking citizen education and feedback, seeking to ensure that citizen

reactions to issues would be based on a fuller understanding of the issues and of alternative approaches.

The outcome of this proposal unfolded over several months in late 1997 and early 1998. Working with a city management team, ICARD staff prepared a briefing paper on the fiscal challenges confronting the city. From the analysis, three budget or policy challenges were identified that would become the bases for further analysis and ultimately the focuses of citizen reaction.

A random sample of more than 150 voters from the city was chosen and invited to join in a three-hour budget seminar, or focus group. The sessions were designed to give a chance to raise and address questions arising from an analysis of the paper and, more important, to gain feedback on the policy issues posed in the briefing paper. Twenty-five citizens participated in each of four closed sessions, sharing their reactions to the issues and offering suggestions on budget strategies.

Further, in response to the council's request, two additional public forums were held to share the budget information more widely and to solicit public reaction to these same budget issues; another 40 people attended these sessions. The briefing paper was given to the local newspaper to stimulate interest and to provide background information for readers. Ultimately, ICARD staff prepared a report on these focus groups and public sessions that was submitted to the manager and council.

The report of the focus groups was timed to influence the early stages of budget deliberations in Ypsilanti, but it may not have been realistic to assume that such major changes as implementing user charges for solid waste collection would be made. The council did authorize the manager to hire an intern to continue the research process, and, during the summer of 1998, a second collaborative effort between the city and the university got under way.

Telephone Surveys
The second strategy was designed to better gauge broad citizen reaction to the current means of funding of solid waste disposal and to determine how citizens might feel about a change. This strategy involved students enrolled in a public opinion and political learning class at Eastern Michigan University during the summer semester of 1998. Class members designed and conducted a survey of Ypsilanti residents.

The survey was prepared by students in the class, a junior-level course in the political science department at EMU, in consultation with the instructor. Students also made decisions on how to code the open-ended items in the survey, as well as offering constructive comments on how to interpret the results. Students had spent a significant amount of time in class honing their skills as public opinion researchers and were well prepared for this exercise in learning by doing. Their work in preparing the survey and report was greatly aided by a presentation by Ypsilanti's city manager, who helped the students understand the substantive issues and described what the city hoped to gain from the survey.

Through the survey, the city was able to understand how the public felt about solid waste services and various funding arrangements. To be sure, the efforts to discern public sentiment were hampered by common difficulties; an uninformed and disinterested citizenry and the related bias in terms of who had participated in the data collection efforts were two of the most severe difficulties. Still, as discussed ahead, these efforts represented a reasonable attempt to involve the public in the budgeting process. Their success, however, will ultimately depend upon heeding the advice that was offered.

Lessons for Others
Each of the efforts described here was designed to collect citizen reactions to key public policy questions. Both the focus groups and the survey were aimed in part at the narrow issue of financing for solid waste services, although the broader issue of user charges was also posed. Both efforts reflected the commitment of city officials to the important and difficult task of informing citizens and providing mechanisms by which they could be heard. What lessons can be learned from the experiences? We conclude this article by offering some suggestions under four broad headings; other lessons could undoubtedly be added.

Securing meaningful citizen involvement. While, almost every day, a call for citizen involvement emanates

from civic journals, elected officials, and the popular press, getting citizen reaction on either the narrow policy issues or the broad questions of service and budget is difficult. For one thing, citizens are extremely skeptical of any efforts to involve them; they think such efforts might be "rigged" in some way, or they presume that their feedback will be ignored. Whenever the authors had close contact with potential citizen participants, this message was communicated, loud and clear. The distrust and skepticism shown toward government translated into distrust and skepticism toward efforts to involve them.

Given our strong belief in the necessity of breaking this cycle of cynicism, we think it is important that local governments not abandon their efforts to "bring the citizen back in," even in the face of such skepticism. Only by repeated efforts to engage citizens and to communicate the message that their opinions matter can cities and counties build and sustain a cadre of politically involved residents. Goodwill that would be generated toward local governments through involving citizens, coupled with the benefits of hearing different perspectives, make this effort an important one. Thus, constant work on the part of councils and administrators is required to ensure that these efforts succeed.

Even if citizens can be persuaded that their opinions matter and that they should be involved, knowledge barriers can limit participation levels. Citizens who are uninformed and know they are uninformed may choose not to take part, reasoning that their views will matter little to the community (and will contribute little to civic discourse). Citizens who are uninformed but think they have the answers might be little better than an annoyance to local governments; we suspect that most managers have little use for residents' pushing misguided solutions to the locality's problems.

Therefore, any attempts to involve citizens must have a significant educational component. Both the focus groups and, to a lesser extent, the surveys, educated Ypsilanti residents about the challenges confronting the city and then solicited their opinions. But there are risks in doing this. Any information given to citizens in the context of such a study runs the clear risk of biasing responses. Try as we might, we can never be sure that even the most innocuous language avoids this risk. These risks, however, must be borne if we wish to educate citizens to enable their (useful) involvement.

Methodological approaches and problems. Once the decision has been made to seek citizen input, the crucial question becomes how to do it. This article has presented examples of two methods: focus groups and random-sample surveys. Each method has its advantages and disadvantages. One dimension in which these methods differ is the question of the depth versus the breadth of the responses gained. Focus groups get more information from respondents but also necessarily mean using fewer respondents.

Mass mailings, used by some communities, reach the largest number of respondents but enable the researcher to get only a limited amount of information from respondents. Telephone surveys like that employed in Ypsilanti fall between the two poles in terms of both the number of respondents reached and the depth of information gleaned from them.

A second dimension on which these methods differ is the randomness of the sample of the people to whom we speak. Focus groups purport to draw a random sample of people; however, given methodological problems over how respondents are selected and given the self-selection bias among those who agree to participate, the focus-group efforts here depicted drew a distinctly nonrandom sample of respondents. Mass mailings can be sent to a random sample of respondents or to all residents, as has been done in many communities.

The telephone survey described here used a random sample of residents, though not of voters. There is absolutely no guarantee, however, that a random sample of people solicited will return the surveys or respond to the telephone inquiry. Any phone list, such as that used in Ypsilanti, is not strictly random (a problem we can usually live with); however, a 50 percent refusal rate must call into question the pure randomness of the sample.

Other methodological issues emerged for us concerning generating lists of potential respondents. First, voter registration lists proved almost useless as a source of citizen contact. In Ypsilanti, more than half the invitations sent to a sample of residents drawn from the registration list were returned as undeliverable. Part of

the problem is a reflection of the transient nature of a university community. This is compounded by the fact that the state requires the city clerk to retain names on the list for 10 years before purging them.

The alternative used in Ypsilanti--
selecting names from the list of residents who actually voted in the most recent election--skews the sample to those who are most politically active.

Self-selection in forming focus groups reinforces the pattern: only those who are most interested in politics and public policy issues are likely to participate.

A final dimension relating to the choice of approaches for involving citizens concerns cost. Each of these methods has fixed costs associated with them (although, in the case of the phone survey, using the services of university classes cut costs considerably). Focus-group respondents and facilitators must be paid. Survey authors and data analyzers must be paid, and postage costs on mailings can be expensive as well.

Ypsilanti paid less than $5,000 for the focus groups and public forums, including preparing the briefing paper, while the cost of the survey conducted by the class was limited to that of duplicating the surveys. University offices and phones used to support the survey also reduced direct costs. This, of course, does not take into account any indirect costs of these efforts, such as staff time.

Information is not cheap to obtain. While sympathetic to the fiscal constraints confronting local governments, we believe that efforts to engage citizens in the government make these costs seem more like investments in the future success of local governments. We also encourage governments to explore innovative ways to fund these data collection efforts, as Ypsilanti did by involving students in the telephone survey.

Multiple approaches to gathering citizen views are probably necessary. No one method is completely devoid of problems; thus, good research should use a variety of methods. While cost constraints are important, we stand by the general conclusion that the most useful information is that obtained in one way and confirmed in others.

Follow-up. The evidence of skepticism and cynicism among the general public in both communities makes it even more important that local officials follow up on their efforts to secure citizen involvement.

In Ypsilanti, the decision to begin the process of systematically educating the community and securing citizen involvement led to the focus-group project. Two specific recommendations from among several that emerged from the focus groups have been implemented by the city manager. The EMU graduate student who worked on the focus groups was hired as an intern in the manager's office to conduct research on the city's solid waste services. More recently, he has finished a comparative analysis of the use of "fees for service" by local governments similar to Ypsilanti.

The manager also worked closely with Professor Bernstein and his students during the summer of 1998, completing the citizen survey on solid-waste financing options. Early that fall, mindful of the need to give feedback to the citizens who had participated in the focus groups, the mayor also sent a personal letter outlining progress to date on the initiatives that had motivated the project. While this article is certainly not an "objective" assessment in academic terms, an impartial observer might look at the unfolding of events over the past two years in Ypsilanti and conclude that the city has followed through on the advice of the citizens in the focus groups.

At the same time, participants in the focus groups in particular did not limit themselves to comments and recommendations on the specific questions posed by facilitators. Participants also suggested a variety of ways to strengthen the local tax base and recommended various cost-saving strategies. While these contributions were beyond the scope of the focus-group project, citizens will expect local officials to consider their suggestions.

This is the ultimate dilemma facing local officials. Often, the constraints they face limit their ability to change the status quo. Funded programs have a built-in constituency, and citizens are generally satisfied with the way

things are. Revenue constraints limit the ability to undertake new initiatives, even if desired by residents. Thus, asking for citizen feedback is not the same thing as acting on that feedback, given the multiple pressures facing decisionmakers. If we create the expectation that something will be done with citizen feedback, we must follow through or run the risk of even further alienating citizens.

University/community collaboration. The efforts described here in Ypsilanti involved a type of university/ community collaboration. Ypsilanti contracted with the Institute for Community and Regional Development (ICARD) at EMU to implement the focus-group project, and an EMU class undertook the telephone survey on solid-waste financing options. This obviously was a positive sign for university/ community relations.

But, judging from the comments made by participants in the Ypsilanti focus groups and from a cursory review of local newspapers, there is considerable strain between "town" and "gown," as there can be in such communities. The view that the university doesn't contribute enough to the community was expressed forcefully by respondents.

On the other hand, focus-group participants applauded the involvement of faculty and students in this project and encouraged other collaborative efforts. This recommendation reinforces the more general view that universities have a special obligation to make their expertise and resources available to address the problems of the community.

Beyond this argument for the university's "giving back" to the community, the projects described here reflect the opportunity afforded to the university to work in the community. Local public policy problems afford an ideal laboratory for student and faculty learning. This is perhaps clearest in the example of the EMU class project, but both of our two efforts suggest a similar conclusion. The students working on the survey had the chance to learn about public opinion and polling (and local government) at first hand, linking theory and practice.

They also contributed in a meaningful way to the community, were listed as coauthors on the report submitted to the city (an addition to their resumes), and improved their future job prospects in the process. The student who assisted in the focus-group project in Ypsilanti was hired to conduct follow-up research. Such connections are invaluable for students.

Both faculty and students can learn from such local policy research in still another way. The experience in both cases showed to students the influence of politics and political values in the policy analysis process. Such values were reflected in an attention to the wording of questions and in a sensitivity to whether data would reflect differences among wards (Ypsilanti officials wanted separate focus groups for each of the city's three wards) and to the dilemmas of responding to citizen input.

Understanding this political context of decision making is an important part of the learning process and one that is often difficult to address in a classroom setting. Faculty and students alike have gained from this immersion in local politics and public policy analysis. Wholeheartedly, we urge others to follow this example in their own communities or classrooms.

Joe Ohren and Jeffrey Bernstein teach in the department of political science at Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan.