

ARTICLE

# The role of citizen participation and action research principles in Main Street revitalization

An analysis of a local planning project

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the use of citizen participation techniques during the planning process for neighborhood revitalization in the Village of Depew which is an industrial suburb of Buffalo, New York. The article focuses on how action research principles can inform and enhance traditional approaches to citizen participation. In particular, we discuss our role as university-based consultants in the local planning process and how drawing from action research principles helped us remain focused on advocating for broad-based citizen participation. Our analysis was based on the application of action research principles and participant observation techniques. During the time that each of us was involved in the planning process for Depew's neighborhood revitalization, reflexive field notes and other data were collected. The article critiques how citizen participation was used to plan for neighborhood revitalization in Depew, and discusses the degree to which action research principles can be applied to future citizen participation efforts.

## KEY WORDS

- citizen participation
- community development
- neighborhood revitalization
- urban planning

## **An uncommon approach to a common problem**

In many cases, consultants involved in neighborhood revitalization efforts share a common experience of trying to engage citizens in planning projects without a clear mandate to do so. This article examines a neighborhood revitalization effort we were involved in as university-based consultants, and discusses the degree to which our efforts to employ action research principles affected the plan that ultimately emerged. In many ways this is a cautionary tale, which sheds light on the strengths and weaknesses of citizen participation techniques in small towns and municipalities. The telling of this story also presented us with an opportunity to reflect on our experience and offer suggestions for refining citizen participation techniques used in local planning projects. A primary motivation behind undertaking this analysis and writing this article was to uncover new approaches to integrating action research principles with consulting work. Particularly, we hoped to use action research techniques in a manner that would promote more participation among groups traditionally underrepresented in local decision-making. To some degree we were able to accomplish this. However, the most important lessons we learned stemmed from the obstacles we encountered to promoting full participation.

The neighborhood revitalization effort examined in this article parallels planning projects in many small towns and municipalities. The effort was initiated by the Village of Depew, a working-class suburb of Buffalo, NY. The village was able to access Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) dollars to address blight and decline in its Main Street neighborhood. These dollars made it possible for the village to hire us as outside consultants to develop a plan for neighborhood revitalization. Since CDBG monies were used to fund the planning process, the scope of neighborhood revitalization focused on a small area in the village which was economically disadvantaged. Although it was not mandated by law, the use of CDBG dollars provided the village with a justification for emphasizing citizen participation and equity issues in the planning process. Of course, this emphasis was tempered by other stakeholder interests, particularly those of business owners and county government.

As consultants, we interfaced with stakeholders who had a spectrum of views on how neighborhood revitalization should be pursued. On one side of the redevelopment debate, manufacturing and construction businesses, village officials, and county officials were focused on promoting neighborhood revitalization by expanding road access to the Main Street neighborhood. It was thought that infrastructure improvements would facilitate industrial expansion and improve general economic conditions in the area. On the other side of the redevelopment debate, residents and the owners of retail businesses were focused on revitalizing the Main Street commercial strip, improving public parks, and addressing problems associated with absentee landlords. The challenge that we

faced as consultants was twofold. First, we needed to develop a collaborative planning process where residents and other stakeholders could outline a strategy for neighborhood revitalization. Then, we needed to put into action a citizen participation process that would give residents, particularly members of the working poor, a sustained voice in planning for neighborhood revitalization. We believed that we could expand the scope of citizen participation and advocate for groups traditionally left out of the planning process by infusing action research principles into our work.

From the onset of this project we knew that reflecting upon our work could inform the citizen participation and action research literature. So, we approached the project with three goals in mind. Our first goal was to apply our knowledge of citizen empowerment to the planning process, in essence linking theory to practice. Our second goal was to establish an action research stance in the project, in order to identify ways that groups traditionally underrepresented in planning at the local level could have greater influence on the process. Our third goal was to create space for reflexivity in the project, so that we could step back and look at the process with our academic hats on as the neighborhood revitalization effort unfolded. In essence, reflexivity had two roles in our work. Like Cameron, Hayes, and Wren (2000), we viewed reflexivity as a core component of the action research process. In this sense, it allowed us to continuously examine our role in the research process and its effect on other participants. However, we also shared Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw's (1995) view of reflexivity as a core component of qualitative analysis, which informed the development of this article.

In the sections that follow we tell the story of neighborhood revitalization in Depew, NY. Although the focus is on Depew, this could be the story of any small town or municipality in the United States. We begin with a discussion of recurrent themes in the literature related to citizen participation, and their relevance to this case study. The literature review is followed by a more detailed discussion of our methodology, the neighborhood which was the focus of revitalization efforts, and the scope of participation in the planning process. We conclude with a discussion of the lessons we learned from this project.

## **Can we really rebuild Main Street from the bottom up?**

### **Citizen participation techniques and action research in the contemporary context**

The typical neighborhood revitalization effort is shaped by competing interests. In many instances, institutional actors have a heavy influence on decision-making that guides the neighborhood revitalization process. This was the situation at the onset of the neighborhood revitalization effort we were engaged in. In response,

we made a conscious decision to use citizen participation techniques and drawn from action research principles to counter this tendency. As university-based consultants, we had no legal mandate to do this. We were simply hired to develop a neighborhood revitalization plan by our client, the Village of Depew. Like many projects of this nature, the scope of citizen participation was not defined in detail by our client. Although we could have simply developed a plan and submitted it to the village at the end of the process, our goal was to make citizen participation a core component of the planning process. We also went a step beyond traditional citizen participation techniques by adopting an action research stance. This stance allowed us to place neighborhood residents at the center of the research process and act as advocates for their interests.

Our theory was that input from a broader spectrum of the community would produce a neighborhood revitalization plan that differed from those we saw emerging from more circumscribed processes. We believed that such a plan would gain wider acceptance from the public, and have a greater chance of being implemented. We were fortunate, since village officials were supportive of the approach we adopted, and willing to invest additional time and resources in it. Despite this relatively supportive environment, constraints still existed which hampered efforts to achieve full participation. A review of the literature on citizen participation and action research will provide a framework for the analysis of these constraints.

Unlike Arnstein's (1969) seminal work, this case study focuses on a citizen participation process that was not explicitly mandated by statute. Arnstein's research was done during the 1960s in reference to formal participatory processes mandated by agencies like the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Her analysis produced a 'ladder of citizen participation' that could be used to understand the degree to which citizens had access to the public policy process. The ladder included eight types of participation which ranged from manipulation of citizens to complete citizen control of the policy process. The thrust of Arnstein's research was to advocate for strengthening existing legislation.

In contrast, this article focuses on a more fluid approach to citizen participation found in the contemporary planning milieu. This approach is driven by the professional practices of consultants and outside contractors. Although some aspects of Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation apply to this case study, it is important to note that in the contemporary period the institutional context in which citizen participation is embedded is qualitatively different than in the past. The core distinction to be made between citizen participation in the past and present is that today it tends to be driven more by professional norms than legislative mandates. In fact, the long-term influence of Arnstein's work may have been to promote the development of those norms, rather than more detailed legislative mandates for citizen participation.

In addition to the contributions of research on citizen participation, the

context in which participation occurs in planning has been shaped by the increased role of non-governmental entities in the implementation of housing and community development policy (Bochmeyer, 2003; Milward & Proven, 2000; Swanstrom, 1999). In the past, governmental agencies were more directly involved in citizen participation activities. Today, governmental functions are increasingly contracted out to consultants. The institutional context in which citizen participation is embedded has become increasingly privatized, and fiscal constraints have eroded the capacity of local governments to formulate community development strategies on their own. These factors have promoted an environment where planning functions that have traditionally been carried out by local government are contracted out to consultants. As a result, the role of citizens in the planning process has become somewhat ambiguous.

In this new context, municipalities have increasingly relied on consultants to define the scope of citizen participation in their decision-making and policy implementation processes. For consultants who view citizen participation and action research techniques as beneficial to local planning, this new environment represents fertile ground for innovation and experimentation. Such interests can be fostered in settings where public officials share professional norms with consultants. Pragmatically, public officials may also see an incentive for supporting greater citizen participation and the use of action research techniques in order to demonstrate their accountability to the public. Moreover, public officials may view expanding the scope of public input in local planning efforts as a strategy to gain leverage against other institutional actors. Within this context, real opportunities exist for consultants to advocate for greater participation of groups that have traditionally been left out of the planning process. The adoption of action research techniques adds weight to this type of advocacy, since they are built on a bottom-up approach to inquiry which is aimed at producing more equitable policy outcomes.

Correspondingly, citizen participation is often valued by public officials because it adds legitimacy to the local development process. Action research techniques are compatible with this sentiment, since they offer a mechanism for giving individuals who are often left out of decision-making an active voice in analysis that impacts policy. This type of input is particularly crucial to maintaining public support for decisions about local development during times of fiscal constraint. For example, Scavo (1993) found that citizen participation was emphasized in cities facing economic constraints and instability. In such cities, he found that citizen participation was an integral component of local efforts to revitalize neighborhoods, and a variety of citizen participation techniques were used. Many of these techniques entail elements that mirror action research approaches. For instance, Scavo (1993) identified the creation of neighborhood councils and the appointment of community representatives on decision-making bodies as techniques used by municipalities to enhance citizen input.

These techniques are compatible with efforts of action researchers to forge an equal partnership with residents and other stakeholders. However, action research goes a step further, formalizing the role of citizens in the research and analysis that leads to the production of policy options. Action research transforms the research process into a vehicle for placing local concerns at the center of the policy formulation process. As a result, community members have a direct role in shaping the information that policy options are based upon. In contrast to traditional citizen participation processes where community members are asked to choose between policy options formulated by analysts and experts, processes guided by action research transform community members into analysts and experts. Consequently, citizens' interests gain saliency in the process and this is reflected in policy outcomes and implementation.

### **Citizen participation practice informed by action research principles**

When developing our approach to planning for neighborhood revitalization, we drew from the literature on citizen participation and action research. For example, the techniques outlined by Jones (1993), Sanoff (2000) and Thomas (1995) for organizing community meetings were employed in the setting examined in this article. In particular, we organized citizen workshops where residents and institutional stakeholders sat at the table together and participated as equals in community mapping. In many respects, the community mapping activities we employed paralleled the participatory action research tools used by Amsden and VanWynsberghe (2005). The adoption of these techniques produced a specific type of participatory experience for institutional stakeholders and residents. This experience entailed participant involvement in semi-structured discussions about community needs and planning alternatives. These discussions were augmented with maps, photographs, and other graphics representing community characteristics. Guided by action research principles aimed at promoting equity, we made a concerted effort to orient these materials in a manner that highlighted the perspective of working-class residents. In part, this was accomplished by focusing on neighborhood amenities and community demographics. Of course, our approach was not pure action research; rather, it blended action research principles with traditional citizen participation techniques.

A recent example of a similar approach being applied to citizen participation in the planning process is discussed in Dalbey and Perkes' (2003) case study of citizen participation in parkway planning. In this case study, the authors describe how planning workshops were used in Jackson, Mississippi's inner city, to link university resources with community planning efforts. Although the context in which these techniques were used placed constraints on achieving full participation, Dalbey and Perkes argued that their use heightened public officials'

awareness of community concerns and increased accountability in the planning process. Adams (2004) reached a similar conclusion in his research on public meetings. Likewise, Crewe (2001) found that the citizen participation process made professional designers more responsive to resident concerns in her study of the relationship between professionals and the citizen participation process.

In a more general sense, Burby (2003) argued that citizen involvement can impact the content of plans for local development and the chances that a plan will be implemented. In particular, Burby pointed out that broad-based participation by community stakeholders can promote the development of multidimensional plans and a strong community consensus. Similarly, Gerber and Phillips (2004) argued that although citizen participation does not radically alter general patterns of development in communities, it does change the dynamics of the decision-making process. In the context of their study, it was found that broad-based citizen participation processes caused developers to intensify their interactions with community groups and consider resident concerns in the local development process to a greater degree.

### **Action research principles and the limitations of citizen participation techniques**

Although we take the position of advocates for expanding citizen participation in this article, we fully acknowledge the limitations of participatory techniques. For instance, our work was informed by Day (1997), who pointed out that citizen participation tends to be biased toward individuals and groups who have access to resources and information. Day argued that these advantages allow such individuals to become more engaged in public dialogue, while lower income groups are under-represented in the participation process. Day also pointed out that bureaucratic and technocratic interest can reduce the impact of residents in the participation process. When participation is structured by their prerogatives, even better organized residents have less impact on the policy process. A recent study of transportation planning in Australia reaffirmed this point. This study argued that in the face of bureaucratic and technocratic control, the citizen participation process runs the risk of being used to impose plans favored by local governments on residents (Lahiri-Dutt, 2004). Likewise, Mosse (2001) argued that the structure and content of participatory planning processes can be heavily influenced by planning agencies, resulting in the loss of community input and control.

Other literature heightened our awareness of the limitations of citizen participation strategies. For example, Lando (2003) argued that information gathered through the citizen participation process is often ignored by public officials, and Callahan (2000) argued that when citizens are placed in key positions in local decision-making they are often given inadequate technical support to have an impact on policy. Silverman (2003) came to a similar conclusion in his

analysis of citizens' advisory boards in Detroit, MI. Irvin and Stansbury (2004) add that in addition to concerns linked to resources, technical assistance, and varying levels of expertise, citizen participation is sometimes prohibitively costly to local governments. Since time constraints and the financial costs associated with participation are argued to be prohibitive, Irvin and Stansbury (2004) argue that the decision to pursue citizen participation should be made strategically.

In light of these critiques, we attempted to work through some of the obstacles to citizen participation by reflecting on our experience as consultants in a local neighborhood revitalization effort. In this role, we advocated for the increased application of action research principles and theory linked to the deliberative democracy literature in local planning (Fung & Wright, 2001; Gustavsen, 2001; Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Reason & Bradbury, 2006; Stoecker, 2005; Stringer, 1999; Weeks, 2000). One principle that guided our work was drawn from the work of scholars like David (2002). This work focuses on the question of ownership in social research. David argues that in environments where community-based research is embedded in contractual relationships between institutions and consultants, there is a need for researchers to act as advocates for community members. Specifically, he argues that action researchers should focus on the interests of disenfranchised groups in order to address unequally distributed power in the policy process. Schafft and Greenwood (2003) make a similar argument, stressing the need for action researchers to reach out to socio-economically disadvantaged groups.

A second principle that guided our work was drawn from researchers like Amsden and VanWynsberghe (2005). This work emphasizes the role of action research in validating local knowledge. It is argued that action research can facilitate collaboration between residents and other stakeholders in community-based projects. This heightened level of exchange builds consensus around the results of action research. In turn, there is an increased likelihood that policy growing out of action research will be supported by all stakeholders and implemented collaboratively.

The final principle that guided our work involved the role of reflexivity in both the action research process and the analytic process that drives theory development. From the beginning of our work, we intended to engage in applied research and examine that work in order to inform theory. As a result, we understood that our work would be tied to two types of reflexivity. As the applied research unfolded, we remained cognizant of our influence on residents and other stakeholders. Reflexivity in this context allowed us to avoid instances where stakeholders might lose control of the research process. At another level, we remained focused on our goal to inform action research theory by developing an understanding of the applied work we were a part of. In this context, reflexivity allowed us to disengage from our work and consider its broader implications for action research. In the remainder of this article, we discuss the degree to which



our efforts to blend action research principles with citizen participation techniques succeeded and the areas where our goals were unrealized.

## Methods

The analysis in this article was based on participant observation technique. Each of us was a member of a team of university-based consultants who were hired to develop a plan for neighborhood revitalization in the area examined in this article. The planning process that was being studied occurred between November 2003 and July 2004. During the time that we were involved in this planning process, field notes and other data were collected. As members of the team of consultants, we had unique access to the research setting. This included access to all facets of the planning process as well as stakeholders and residents in the community being studied. In addition, the analysis for this article was planned and openly discusses from the onset of the project.

Each of us kept field notes related to the day-to-day work being done on the project, and we also kept separate field notes where we reflected upon the link between the theory driving our work and the degree to which our efforts to promote citizen participation were successful. In addition to these activities, a portion of our weekly research meetings was dedicated to discussion of the link between theory and planning practice. These discussions had a dual purpose. First, they aimed to refine our approach to incorporating action research principles in our work. Second, they provided us with an opportunity to exchange ideas with the graduate students who were members of our research team. In fact, our interactions with the graduate students were guided by action research principles, since they worked side by side with us on the project as equals (Reason & Marshall, 2006).

This approach to the analysis allowed us to be reflexive about our role as consultants throughout the process, while focusing our field notes and data collection activities. This is noteworthy, since being reflexive and immersion in a research setting are often identified as key elements of both ethnographic research and participatory inquiry (Brewer, 2000; Cameron et al., 2000; Emerson et al., 1995; Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Stoecker, 2005; Stringer, 1999). It is also noteworthy since this research entailed the benefits and obstacles of team ethnography discussed by Erickson and Stull (1998). The research benefited from the multidisciplinary perspective that each team member brought to the process. For example, one of us is trained as an ethnographer, another is a historian, and another is an earth scientist. The multidisciplinary composition of our research team forced us to grapple with differing normative and methodological approaches to planning. At another level, we had differing degrees of familiarity with the research site itself. For instance, one of us grew up near the Main Street

neighborhood, while the rest of us had less personal experience in the area. We also viewed the process differently due to our differing personal biographies, socioeconomic classes, and races.

The dual role of researcher and consultant also allowed us to view the process that we were a part of from multiple perspectives, enabling us to critically evaluate it as it unfolded. The insights that emerged through this process influenced the scope of the planning activities that were pursued and shaped the final recommendations for neighborhood revitalization. Although this analysis is not exactly what some define as project-based or participatory action research (Stoecker, 2005; Stringer, 1999), it reflects an intermediate step toward bringing applied research and academic inquiry together. In fact, a driving force behind the decision to pursue this research was our desire to look critically at how we approached citizen participation in our consulting work. In essence, the infusion of action research principles into our work allowed us to expand the role of residents and other stakeholders in the research process and critically examine the effectiveness of the citizen participation techniques we used. From that critical analysis, we hoped to inform theory and identify places where we could better apply action research principles in the future.

In addition to the qualitative analysis in this article, secondary data were used to frame the issues being examined and to contextualize the problems surrounding the neighborhood revitalization process. These data included census and other demographic measures, as well as archival materials gathered in the research site. Combined, the data collected in this analysis were used to generate a critique of the citizen participation process that was employed to plan for neighborhood revitalization in the Main Street neighborhood of Depew. Drawing from this critique we discuss the lessons we learned and make recommendations for enhancing the role of citizen participation and action research principles in local planning processes. In the next section, we present a portrait of the context in which citizen participation was embedded in the project. This section is followed by a more detailed discussion of the citizen participation process itself.

### **Portrait of a contemporary Main Street**

The Village of Depew is a working-class suburb of Buffalo, NY. Historically, it has been the home to manufacturing and transportation industries. Although most of the industry that once was in the village is now gone, a variety of small industrial businesses remain alongside idle industrial property. In addition to light industry, small retail businesses, and brownfields, a number of railroad lines run through the village and the flight path of the Buffalo-Niagara International Airport is directly above it. At the center of the village is the Main Street neighborhood. At one time, this neighborhood was a core component of the village. It contained a large



**Figure 1** Main Street neighborhood land use

factory which produced railroad components, a facility that assembled tank turrets, housing for factory workers, and the Main Street commercial corridor. Following the Second World War, industrial and commercial activity declined and conditions in the Main Street neighborhood deteriorated. Employment and commercial activity migrated to other areas during this time and much of the property along the Main Street commercial corridor was either converted into low rent apartments or it became vacant. The boundaries (which consist of block group 1 of census tract 145.02 in Erie County, NY) and current land use characteristics of the Main Street neighborhood are identified in Figure 1.

Like the Main Street commercial corridor, the Main Street neighborhood has transitioned into a low-income residential community with vacant property and a small number of retail businesses disbursed in it. Although the population, employment and housing trends that have transformed the neighborhood are long-term in nature, they continue to impact development efforts and pose obstacles to citizen participation. In essence, households in the Main Street neighborhoods confront a number of time and resource constraints that impinge upon their ability to participate in civic affairs. During the last decade these constraints have intensified. An examination of these trends between 1990 and 2000 highlights the scope of these obstacles (US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1990, 2000).

Since 1990, noticeable shifts have occurred in the population and household characteristics of the Main Street neighborhood. In 2000 the neighborhood

had a population of 1000, and it experienced a 6.5 percent population loss between 1990 and 2000. Despite declining population, the area remained a racially homogenous community, with over 97 percent of its residents reporting to be white in 2000. The area also remained economically disadvantaged during the decade. In 2000, the median household income in the Main Street neighborhood was US\$24,940. This was in stark contrast to the US\$41,150 median household income in the village. Similarly, 15.2 percent of the residents in the Main Street neighborhood lived below the poverty level in 2000, while the poverty rate was 5.6 percent in the village. Likewise, 8.2 percent of the households in the Main Street neighborhood received public assistance in 2000, while only 1.7 percent did in the village.

Employment trends in the Main Street neighborhood presented additional obstacles to citizen participation. In 2000, there were 575 individuals from the neighborhood above the age of 16 in the labor force. This represented a 12 percent decline in labor force participation since 1990. Over 78 percent of these individuals were concentrated in sales, service, pink collar, and low skill trades positions. The concentration of workers in these positions was at least 10 percent higher for the Main Street neighborhood than the village or the Buffalo region as a whole. Although the Buffalo region and the village have strong working-class identities, on the surface the Main Street neighborhood seemed to retain this identity to a greater extent in the contemporary period. However, when income, poverty rates, and public assistance were taken into consideration, it appeared that residents of the Main Street neighborhood were really members of the working poor.

Housing trends in the Main Street neighborhood compounded the obstacles to promoting citizen participation in the local planning process. The neighborhood experienced modest losses in the total number of housing units during the 1990s. There were 511 housing units in the neighborhood in 2000, which represented a 3.2 percent loss in housing units between 1990 and 2000. However, this statistic should be understood in the context of the neighborhood. In part, the modest reduction in total housing units reflects a general pattern in low-income neighborhoods where some single family homes are demolished while others are divided into multiple rental properties. Other indicators reflect the general decline in housing conditions during the 1990s. For instance, the median value of owner-occupied housing units in the neighborhood was US\$73,800. This was US\$11,340 below the median value of owner-occupied housing units in the village, despite similarities in the age and architectural features of housing units. Of course the biggest contrast between the neighborhood and the village involved housing tenure. In the Main Street neighborhood, renters made up over 70 percent of the occupants of housing, while they made up less than 30 percent of the occupants in the village. Finally, the neighborhood had an 11.5 percent vacancy rate, which was almost three times the vacancy rate in the village.

In contrast to the village, the Main Street neighborhood was a geographically distinct, working poor, rental community. These demographic and housing characteristics presented real obstacles to promoting citizen participation among the residents of the neighborhood. Given that other stakeholders in the planning process did not come from this socioeconomic milieu, we approached the project with a heightened sensitivity to amplifying the neighborhood residents' voice in the process. This decision was influenced by the literature on action research (David, 2002; Schafft & Greenwood, 2003; Whyte, 1990). Incorporating action research into our work allowed us to think critically about obstacles to citizen participation and act as advocates for groups that are often disenfranchised from the neighborhood revitalization process. Action research helped to validate the role of these groups in the process and formalized the link between their participation and the legitimacy of the research results.

Of course, we understood that enhancing residents' voice in the planning process was not just a challenge due to the characteristics of the resident population. It was also a challenge because of the limited capacity of local government. Like other working-class suburbs, the Village of Depew had limited resources at hand to deal with development issues. The village had a small government composed of a part-time mayor, a six member board of trustees, a five member zoning board, and a five member planning board. It also had a small cadre of full-time and part-time civil service employees who managed basic services such as police protection, public works, building inspections, and administrative functions. These activities took place under the supervision of a single village administrator. The capacity of local government to deal with issues outside the scope of the day-to-day operation of local government and municipal services was limited. Just as these capacity issues impacted local development efforts, they posed obstacles to efforts to enhance the scope of citizen participation in the planning process. As a result, it was our responsibility to advocate for greater citizen participation in the neighborhood revitalization process. In our role as consultants, we were able to gain some leverage to promote this goal. We were also able to gain the village's cooperation because the village administrator was highly supportive of the strategy we proposed.

## **The scope and impact of participation**

From its onset we incorporated citizen participation into the planning process. The initial steps of this effort involved negotiating for two community workshops in our contractual agreement with the village. It was argued that citizens should play an active role in identifying community needs and critiquing preliminary plans for neighborhood revitalization throughout the planning process. This would add legitimacy to the planning process and help to gain residents' support

for the final plan. In order to achieve these goals, the two community workshops were scheduled during critical points in the planning process. The first community workshop was scheduled at the beginning of the planning process. It occurred before any specific plans for neighborhood revitalization were developed. Residents of the Main Street neighborhood were notified of the workshop through advertisements in a community newspaper and fliers announcing the workshop were hand delivered to each home and small business in the neighborhood two weeks before the meeting. This effort involved us and three graduate students canvassing the neighborhood. This was very effective in generating community interest in the planning process. During the canvassing, numerous conversations between research team members and residents took place. After the fliers were distributed, several residents called the village administrator to get more information about the upcoming community workshop.

### **Opening the process to residents**

The first community workshop was held in the early evening on a weekday. The workshop was in the village's senior center, which was within walking distance of the Main Street neighborhood. Since the meeting was planned for the early evening, food and beverages were provided to participants. As they came into the senior center, residents were given a copy of the agenda for the workshop as well as a brief survey about the neighborhood. The agenda was broken down into six activities: an introduction, an overview of the project, two mapping sessions, a visioning session, and closing comments. Each activity was scheduled for 15–25 minutes. The general purpose of the meeting was to supply residents with information about the planning effort and the neighborhood. Using that information, residents were divided into working groups where they were asked to develop maps identifying areas of concern and plans for neighborhood revitalization.

Twenty-one people attended the first community workshop. There was an even distribution of men and women in the workshop, the average age of the group was around 50, and all of the workshop participants were white. About half of the people attending the workshop were residents of the neighborhood and small business owners from the Main Street commercial strip. The remaining workshop participants included village and county administrators, and elected officials from the village. Missing from the workshop were representatives from the village police department, business owners from the industrial site adjacent to the neighborhood, and landlords who owned property in the neighborhood. In addition to workshop participants, the local community newspaper sent a reporter to cover the first community workshop.

Given the total population of the neighborhood and the relatively mundane nature of the proposed planning activities, we felt that the turnout for the first workshop was good. However, we were also aware that key segments of the

resident population were underrepresented at the meetings. Missing from the meeting were younger members of the community and a cross-section of the renter population. In part, we believed that a broader spectrum of the population would have turned out if the planning activities involved not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) issues, or a significant alteration in land use. However, the turnout was also suppressed because of the socioeconomic characteristics of the neighborhood. As a result, our concerns that other stakeholders would dominate the planning process were heightened. In response to these concerns, we used our position as consultants to keep issues we thought would be of concern to residents on the agenda.

During the course of the community workshop, participants identified a number of priorities for neighborhood revitalization. In some cases, they discussed needs that overlapped with those identified by village officials. For instance, residents believed that there was a need for infrastructure improvements and roadway development in the area. These improvements were also seen as a way to reduce the level of isolation the residents perceived between the neighborhood and the rest of the village. Residents thought that a historic connection existed between redevelopment in the neighborhood and the adjoining industrial site, since the industrial site was once a major source of jobs to neighborhood residents. They also agreed with the general notion that housing rehabilitation and commercial development would improve the community. However, residents discussed additional issues which expanded the scope of subsequent planning activities.

In terms of housing and neighborhood conditions, the residents had additional concerns about absentee landlords in the area, they discussed the need for more parks, and there was concern about the negative stigma associated with the neighborhood. In terms of business needs in the area, residents were more inclined to view the industrial property adjacent to the neighborhood as blighted, and more likely to have concerns about contamination on the site. At the same time, residents had specific suggestions for the types of commercial businesses that were needed along the Main Street commercial corridor. In the same way that residents raised concerns about the industrial site, they also had concerns about their past relationships with local government, and the police department in particular. In addition, they had concerns about parochial issues that affected the quality of life in the neighborhood such as drug dealing, the need for block clubs, and animal control. In essence, residents recognized the need for physical improvements in the neighborhood and they brought a number of additional social concerns to the table. The residents made it clear that a successful neighborhood revitalization effort would entail attention to both physical development and social needs.

### **Advocating for residents behind closed doors**

Following the first community workshop, a series of planning meetings were held with business owners in the industrial site adjacent to the Main Street neighborhood. In addition to meeting with these business owners, we met with representatives from village and county governments. The main focus of these meetings was on developing plans for a road expansion project in the industrial site. The project would ultimately connect the industrial site to the Main Street neighborhood and facilitate the upgrading of infrastructure related to water service in the entire area. In order to develop this element of the plan for neighborhood revitalization, we hired a local engineering firm to design the roadway.

In many ways, this aspect of the planning process was disconnected from our broader neighborhood planning goals. To a degree, the time we spent on the development of the road expansion plan distracted our attention away from other aspects of the planning process. This is a common dilemma that consultants face when working on projects with multiple constituencies. We took two steps to maintain as much of the project's neighborhood focus as possible. First, we asked the engineering firm we hired to present their roadway expansion design at the next community workshop. This was done so that the design could be modified in response to resident concerns. Second, we made it clear to the business owners and representatives from village and county government that our discussions with them were only preliminary. It was understood by all of the institutional stakeholders that our recommendations for roadway expansion would not be finalized until residents had an opportunity for input in the process.

Through the meetings with business owners and representatives from village and county government a number of issues came to the surface. For instance, local governmental officials expressed their belief that the proposed roadway development would benefit both businesses in the industrial site and residents in the adjacent neighborhood. They also felt that the roadway would strengthen the local tax base and alleviate fire hazards in the area. Most of the business owners felt that the roadway improvements and related utility upgrades would be beneficial as well. Of course, there were disagreements over who should pay for the improvements, but the dialogue generated by the meetings solidified a consensus around the benefits of pushing forward with roadway improvements and other elements of the neighborhood revitalization plan.

In addition to holding meetings with institutional stakeholders, we used the time between the first and second community workshops to gather data and develop ideas for the neighborhood's revitalization. Much of these activities were guided by concerns residents raised in the first community workshop. Our central goal was to identify linkages between the activities being planned for the industrial site and those being planned for the Main Street neighborhood. A unifying



theme was developed for the revitalization effort which drew from the area's working-class and industrial history.

### **Giving residents the last word**

The second community workshop was scheduled about four months after the first. In addition to advertising the workshop in the community newspaper and delivering fliers to all of the residential properties in the area, business owners from the industrial site and other stakeholders were invited to the workshop. Turnout for this workshop was higher than the first. Thirty-four people attended the second community workshop. The composition of the participants in the second workshop was similar to the first; however, there were a few noticeable differences. Unlike the first workshop, business owners from the industrial site were in attendance. Landlords from the Main Street neighborhood also came to the second workshop. In part, the presence of these stakeholders was a product of our outreach efforts. However, the larger turnout for the meeting may have also been an outgrowth of greater awareness about the planning process generated through word of mouth in the community and coverage of the process in the community newspaper. As was done for the first community workshop, the local community newspaper sent a reporter to cover the second workshop.

Like the first community workshop, the second was held in the early evening on a weekday. It was in the village's senior center and food was provided to participants. Upon entering the senior center, residents were given a copy of the agenda for the workshop and a brief survey about the neighborhood. The agenda for the second workshop was broken down into six activities: an introduction, a summary of the first community workshop, a discussion of the preliminary plan for roadway improvements, a discussion of the unifying theme, time for community feedback, and closing comments. Each activity was scheduled for 15 minutes, with the exception of the time for community feedback which was allotted 45 minutes. We purposefully allocated more time for community feedback, in order to amplify the voice of neighborhood residents in the planning process.

Although there were a variety of interests at the second community meeting, there was a great deal of agreement about the need for the revitalization plan to move forward. There was no general disagreement about any specific element in the preliminary plan, but various groups prioritized activities differently. The main distinction in priorities was between the residents and other stakeholders. As was the case in the first meeting, the residents articulated a stronger link between physical improvements in the area and social issues. Among issues discussed by residents were: the need for parks, code enforcement, problems with absentee landlords, the need for tenant screening in the neighborhood, and concerns about environmental risks associated with the industrial site. Interestingly, the landlords who attended the workshop were in accord with the residents. In

part, this was because the landlords at the workshop were all residents of the area. Absentee landlords did not attend the workshop.

Residents spoke during the majority of the time allotted for discussion in the workshop, and their concerns did not go unnoticed. Their participation in the community workshops raised the awareness of stakeholders to the connection between physical and social development. For example, one of the county officials involved in the planning process emailed the following message to us the day after the second workshop:

I would hate to see the whole rest of the project and plan's ideas diminished if the folks didn't think that somehow the absentee owner issue is being addressed. The idea of, 'the heck with the whole thing if nothing is done on Main St.' type attitude. I believe there is a good amount of merit to that notion also, due to the difficult situation there. With all that being said, I understand that this issue is arguably the most difficult to resolve in any low-income area. You have the court system which is apparently failing badly and the tenant issues of drugs, bad behavior, you name it. So obviously [the university] isn't going to solve the socioeconomic issues, but for the sake of the study, I think it would make sense to put whatever heavy emphasis on it that you could.

The interesting thing about this email was that it was sent to us unsolicited. Through their dialogue with other stakeholders in the workshop, the residents seem to have gotten their point across. The workshops provided residents with an opportunity to be heard, and other stakeholders took them seriously.

Residents' concerns influenced the planning process in other ways as well. For example, residents' critiques of the engineering firm's preliminary road expansion design led to substantive modifications in the final plan. After receiving feedback from residents, the engineering firm added a sidewalk to the proposed roadway design. In response to residents' comments, the proposed roadway became pedestrian friendly and had improved neighborhood access to public transportation.

In addition to increased stakeholder awareness of residents' concerns, there was some indication that the tone of media coverage began to shift. Prior to the community workshops headlines such as 'Crack Bust Made on Main Street' helped to define public perceptions of the area (Rettenmaier, 2003). After the community workshops, coverage of the area also included front page stories that reflected the concerns of residents about issues like absentee landlords, environmental contamination, and neighborhood revitalization (Rettenmaier, 2004).

One of the effects of the decision to promote citizen participation throughout the planning process was that we were able to push residents' concerns to the forefront. As a result, institutional stakeholders and residents developed a more holistic view of neighborhood revitalization needs in the community. In many respects, we did as well. Residents' priorities were incorporated into the final plan for neighborhood revitalization that we produced for the village. The only stake-

holders who did not recognize the concerns of residents were those who remained detached from the citizen participation process. However, this still remains a cautionary tale. Although residents' concerns were incorporated into the final plan, they had less access to key discussions, such as those dealing with the road expansion project.

It should be noted that we were cognizant of the fact that renters and the working poor were underrepresented in the citizen participation process. In response, we maintained a sustained effort throughout the planning process to develop plans with these groups in mind. In effect, we were responsible for bringing greater balance in the final plan and ensuring that the interests of low-income residents were represented. Additionally, a strong emphasis was placed on promoting sustained citizen participation in future activities related to planning and implementation which grew out of the final plan. Therefore, the plan included recommendations for the creation of an elected residents' advisory board which would participate in future planning activities and monitor implementation.

## **Lessons learned from Main Street**

This case study has been presented to highlight the benefits and limitations of citizen participation techniques in contemporary planning. Based on the critique of the citizen participation process that was used to plan for neighborhood revitalization in this community, this section reflects on the lessons we learned from this experience and offers suggestions for applying action research principles in future consulting work. This case study highlights that even in situations where planners, stakeholders and residents share a commitment to incorporating citizen participation in the planning process the scope of citizen input can be constrained. Impediments to full participation come from multiple sources. The competing interests of residents, business owners, local officials and planners set the parameters for citizen participation in local planning. Within these parameters the groups with the greatest resources, access to information, and time are often able to imprint the most on the planning process. In the contemporary period, the scope of citizen participation is further constrained by: the lack of explicit mandates for citizen participation, ambiguity about the scope of participation, the expanded role of outside consultants in the planning process, and difficulty in mobilizing low-income groups.

In response to these constraints, academics and practitioners have forwarded a number of suggestions for expanding the role of citizen participation in the local planning process. Simonsen and Robbins's (2000) work on citizen participation in public budgeting explains how citizen surveys and citizen juries can be used to give residents a greater voice in local decision-making. They argue that greater citizen input can be achieved by expanding the use of conventional

survey research. Along the same lines of reasoning, scholars are increasingly arguing for the expanded use of the Internet as a citizen participation tool (Kellogg & Mathur, 2003; Snyder, 2003). Many of these arguments have been merged into the growing dialogue concerning e-governance, which proposes that new technologies can be harnessed to expand citizen access to government and local decision-making. Other scholars acknowledge the benefits of such citizen participation techniques, but add that there is a need for greater citizen control in the planning process. Sanoff (2000) makes this point when he calls for the expanded use of community action planning and participatory action research. Gerber and Phillips (2004) build on this tradition in their study of the effects of direct democracy on land use planning. Peterman (2004) also points out that there is a need in the contemporary setting to merge advocacy and collaborative models of community planning in order to enhance the power of disenfranchised groups in local decision-making.

The work of these and other scholars represents a shift toward support for greater resident control of local planning processes. However, we suggest taking citizen participation techniques a step further by wedding them to action research principles. There are at least four benefits to this approach. First, the role of stakeholders is expanded. Traditional citizen participation techniques give stakeholders access to decision-making processes related to community development activities. Action research expands the role of stakeholders, transforming them into active community-based researchers and policy formulators. In Depew, we were able to go beyond traditional citizen participation. Rather than simply holding a public meeting to inform residents about planning activities, we provided residents with a number of opportunities to shape the planning process. Of course, we had mixed levels of success with this approach. The effectiveness of this strategy is particularly visible when contrasting the role of residents in planning activities surrounding neighborhood revitalization with those focused on the road expansion project.

A second benefit to wedding action research principles to citizen participation techniques is that action research draws socioeconomically disadvantaged groups to the center of the research process. This links the legitimacy of research results to the sustained participation and empowerment of these groups. In Depew, this principle allowed us to expand the role of residents in the planning process and propose the creation of an elected residents' advisory board to ensure sustained participation throughout the plan's implementation process. Again, we had mixed levels of success with this approach. Although these elements were included in the final plan, sustained participation of residents is largely dependent on how the client implements it. At the time of writing, our client has moved forward with some of the physical development initiatives recommended in the plan, but it is still uncertain if sustained citizen participation will be mandated by local government.

A third and related benefit of wedding action research principles to citizen participation techniques is that they add clarity to the advocacy role of consultants in research settings where institutions contract their services. As action researchers, consultants assume an ethical responsibility to advocate for disenfranchised groups while gaining a degree of autonomy from their clients. In Depew, this was the case. We remained cognizant of our dual roles as consultants and advocates throughout the planning process, and the adoption of action research principles reinforced this predisposition. Even in a setting where disenfranchised groups had limited access, such as when the road expansion project was discussed, we were able to maintain this advocacy role to some degree. Yet, taking this stance only provided us with a degree of autonomy from our clients. In the end, we were still contractually obligated to produce a plan which was subject to our client's approval.

Finally, wedding action research principles to citizen participation techniques assists in the development of new approaches to resident driven planning. This is because the emphasis action research places on reflexivity complements the development of theory. Through reflexive analysis and praxis, researchers can move beyond the identification of obstacles to citizen participation and refine techniques used in the field to overcome them. In Depew, we were able to experiment with a number of citizen participation techniques and then reflect on our experiences as researchers. This article is testament to that undertaking. Our discussions of the degree to which we succeeded and failed to apply action research principles to the local planning process has allowed us to inform existing theory and practice.

As noted above, wedding action research principles to citizen participation techniques expands our ability to analyze how these techniques work in the field. We have tried to illuminate this aspect of the citizen participation puzzle in the context of work done by consultants. From this examination we can identify three fundamental lessons we have learned. First, although action research principles guided our approach to citizen participation, our strategy was flawed in that we did not integrate residents into our work as extensively as we could have. For instance, we worked very hard to empower residents in the community workshops, but resident involvement in other aspects of the planning process could have been more extensive. In a more expansive approach, residents would have had a place at the table in meetings with business owners and government representatives. Moreover, a more expansive approach would have incorporated residents into the weekly meetings of our research team. This represented an opportunity lost. A more expansive application of action research principles could have also helped us address the second lesson we learned. That lesson related to the continued need to find ways to bring a broader spectrum of residents into the citizen participation process. Greater direct collaboration with residents would have given us a better sense of the community, and possibly

enhanced resident participation. Greater direct collaboration would have also made our methodology more transparent to residents. In the absence of this participation, we ended up serving as surrogates for the residents at critical junctures in the planning process. This was not an ideal situation.

A final lesson we learned involved the degree to which we could fill the dual role of consultants and advocates in our work. In many respects, we walked a fine line in this dual role. Being from a university setting where equity planning is well established made this easier (Krumholz & Forester, 1990). However, we still had to overcome the challenges of selling citizen participation to our client. Our efforts to advocate for groups traditionally left out of the planning process would have been more effective if we had incorporated the use of more action research techniques into our consulting contract. This would have helped to expand resident participation beyond the workshops and created a foundation for sustained resident involvement in plan implementation. The institutionalization of action research in the local planning process would have also added legitimacy to our stance as advocates. In the absence of the institutionalization of action research in the process, our dual role of consultants and advocates was subject to renegotiation throughout the process. This precariousness made it more difficult for us to promote citizen participation in the process.

Despite these limitations, we were modestly successful in enhancing the voice of residents in the local planning process. Residents succeeded in heightening the awareness of institutional stakeholders about the need to link social and physical development in the neighborhood revitalization process. In the interim, they influenced the way their neighborhood was portrayed in the media. And, they had a direct influence on elements of the final neighborhood revitalization plan that we delivered to the village. The question remains, is the citizen participation cup half full or half empty?

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