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A Workshop About Land-Use Decision-Making in the Context of Community/Societal Values

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A Workshop About Land-Use Decision-Making in the Context of Community/Societal Values

Abstract

Community based land-use decision-making is often left to an oligarchy who are familiar with the planning process. Stakeholders are frequently under-represented, possibly because of their unwillingness to participate due to the unfamiliarity with the process. The workshop described here develops participants' understanding of a land-use planning process and the complexity of socio-economic values using individual reflection and shared perspective through writing, model-making, presentations, and discussions. Using consensus-building strategies, along with a documentary film, participants engage in several hands-on group activities. Shared values in combination with new community perspectives are realized through a series of workshop activities.

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For many communities, land-use visioning and decision-making are often difficult and complex. Consensus building among stakeholders representing different ideologies and motivations about how land should or needs to be used can be overwhelming. Opening a dialogue about understanding the values people hold for agriculture, urbanization, conservation, etc., is one way to begin the process. This article describes an innovative workshop that links together several activities to understand landscape values and community land-use decision-making, similar to a rational model described by Gallagher (2002).

The workshop explores the complexities of community land-use decision-making. The workshop incorporates biophysical implications of land-uses as well as the socio-economic and personal values of a real community. The participants develop, construct, and present an imaginary community using a watershed model approach. They come to understand the balance between the responsibility to protect the health, safety, and welfare of citizens, on the one hand, and private property rights, on the other. The participants also learn basic concepts of a land-use planning process. The workshop can be structured around multiple 1- to 2-hour activities or a daylong session. The format described here involves pre-workshop activities that contribute to later discussion and hands-on group activities accommodating approximately 24 participants.

Activities

The first workshop activity has participants each write a one-page reflective statement about community land-use. The participants are given questions to help them compose their reflection.

Example Questions:

1. How do you describe your home community?
2. What impact does the landscape have on how you feel about your community?
3. How was the land used before it had your home on it?

Understanding different points of view and learning about other communities are important workshop objectives; therefore, the second activity is to watch a documentary film entitled *LAND (and how it gets that way)* (Brock, 2004). The film traces five people over 10 years and documents their thoughts about the meaning and uses of land (Garkovich, n.d.). Once the workshop participants have viewed the film, they write a multi-paragraph reflection on the one person in the film they consider his/her antithesis.

Example Questions:

1. What are his/her views on the land?
2. What does the person believe about property rights?
3. What would you say are the values that underlie his/her beliefs on these issues? Why?
4. What, if any, changes did you see in this person?

The reflection helps participants understand different points of view, even though they may not agree with the person in the film. The writing exercises are usually completed without conversation among the participants prior to the first workshop discussion. The film can be watched as a group or by individuals.

Once introductions are completed, the first workshop group session begins with a discussion of the film. This activity helps the facilitator to understand the initial group dynamics. The facilitator focuses the discussion on the participants' reactions to the film.

Participants are divided into four- to six-person groups for the next activity. The small group task is to develop an idealized community land-use vision. To help groups develop that vision, participants are asked to write what the newspaper headlines will be about their envisioned community in 10 years. The groups then make a short presentation describing their visions. The facilitator probes the groups about their visions and the decision-making process, particularly with respect to conflicts. These activities are adaptations of Garkovich (n.d.) and Brock (2004) material.

The next major activity is a lecture about land-use issues tailored to the participants' needs. Traditional land-use planning law and land-use suitability analysis are potential topics. The facilitator, an Extension specialist, or other expert could present this lecture.

Following the lecture, participants are challenged to give physical form to the vision described by their group's newspaper cover. Prior to the workshop, a multi-piece cardboard landform model is constructed. The model is composed of four to six pieces (sub-models) that can be assembled to form a single larger (4'x8') model for use in the next two workshop activities. The small groups use string and multi-colored Post-It paper to designate land-uses on their sub-models. This activity requires participants to go beyond talking about the headlines and make physical land-use decisions.

Once again, the groups give a short presentation (3-5 minutes) followed by discussion. The placement of land-uses is a complicated process, and this activity helps to demonstrate the difficulty. Participants often start making decisions based on life experiences, but this activity encourages insight about the interrelated linkages between the biophysical elements and societal/community values, as well as how they can be influenced by group dynamics.

The next activity requires participants to go beyond the small group community vision, which they often think about as an isolated or island environment. In this activity, participants are required to assemble the larger model from the sub-models. The facilitator guides the participants to highlight conflicts/synergies among the smaller community visions in the larger context. A revised vision is then developed, and the subsequent land-uses are often reconfigured. Again, this activity is followed by a discussion about decision-making and group consensus.

To conclude the workshop, a topical lecture(s)/demonstration(s) about a timely issue(s) or technique(s) related to land-use planning are presented.

Example Topics:

1. New By-Pass Construction
2. Bill Board Construction
3. Agricultural Districts

Conclusion

Recurring workshop themes included an increased awareness of scale, context, and community consensus building. In addition, there is a sense of self and group discovery permeating the activities. Most participants have not been exposed to the dynamics of planning, let alone landform models. Thus, the workshop allows participants to visualize new perspectives of their own landscape. A more comprehensive view of the planning process and an increased awareness of the effect of individual values on socio-economic and physiographic elements have been observed by facilitators and commented on by participants.

This basic workshop has been modified and integrated into K-12 environments. The students utilize role-playing techniques to gain perspective on land-use decision-making in the planning process. The students are responsible for representing stakeholders ranging from individual landowners with varying socio-economic backgrounds to government administrators.

The novelty of this workshop is the integration and progression of the activities. Each activity helps participants discover his or her own landscape value system as well as better understand other participants' perspectives and value systems. Participants have commented that the mixture of individual and group activities is what makes the workshop beneficial. Extension agents can play a key role in organizing and/or facilitating a workshop like the one described in this article because agents are often in contact with many different stakeholder groups and are frequently seen as a source of information and support by communities.

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