

Managing Democracy: Are you for real?

By Curt Yoakum

It looks as though the Annual Conference Planning Committee and the AMC staff once again pulled off a fabulous event in Rochester. This was the first AMC conference at which I was not staffing multiple sessions. I was lucky enough to enjoy a few meetings and view the exhibits, though. Being an observer and seeing all of the parts moving at once is to watch chaos transform into a pretty special event.

Since leaving AMC in August, I have been complementing my studies at the Humphrey Institute with an assistantship at the University of Minnesota Extension's Community Vitality offices. Specifically, I am working with them to forward the U-Connect Public Participation program and ensure its relevance to counties and other local governments. I had the opportunity at the conference to present information about this program to the AMC Extension Committee and the planning and zoning officers. I welcome this chance to follow up that meeting with this article.

Not a week goes by for county officials that they don't have to act on an issue that affects the residents of the county – feedlots, lakeshore development, ATV trails, property taxes, methamphetamine trafficking, and the list goes on. For these issues, there is usually no easy solution. There are conflicting interests, misconceptions, vocal minorities and right-versus-right conundrums.

You know it's better to engage your constituents and get input rather than the board just deciding. But, how do you get past the sinking feeling that it will be the same vocal minority showing up or – even worse – no one showing up?

John Bryson and other faculty at the U of M's Humphrey Institute have done fascinating research about engaging the public during the policy making process. The research highlights the most basic questions that you as a county board most likely ask when going forward with a strategy for public participation: Who are the stakeholders? How do we bring them into the room? How do we get those arguing to talk? When is the go-ahead point reached?

You might ask how relevant some weighty academic tome is to the daily grind of real-life governing. That is where the U-Connect Extension team enters the picture. The U-Connect program bridges the gap between academic theory and the very real issues you face everyday. Extension's leadership and civic engagement regional educators have been able to apply university research on public participation strategies to community-specific issues such as land use planning, natural resource planning, methamphetamine issues and a school referendum. The most interesting part of the program to me, however, is that the benefit transcends the specific issue. The aim of U-Connect is not only to address the problem at hand, but to strengthen the community's ability to address future situations. It builds community. They can do this by working with the county to:

- Design effective participation processes that enable people to have a voice in community issues.
- Help you create, manage & evaluate ideas in public settings.
- Determine the appropriateness of types of outreach given your goals.
- Create & manage meetings that enhance participation opportunities.
- Provide training to elected officials and administrators about public participation processes.

As a busy and goal-oriented person, you want to see results. The U-Connect program goes beyond the theory and works with you to achieve tangible results to real problems and opportunities. For instance, the soil and water districts in Minnesota were required to develop a public engagement process in order to receive federal funds for environmental quality. By working with the U-Connect team, they were very effective in securing funds by addressing the mandates. Minnesota was fourth in the nation that year for funding from that source. That's real money.

I have only scratched the surface in this article of the possibilities that U-Connect offers to counties. Please give some thought to how it may be useful in your community. Extension is very interested in helping you explore options. For further information about this program, visit www.extension.umn.edu/u-connect. At that site, you can get contact information for your leadership and civic engagement regional educator. Or, contact Mary Ann Hennen at 612- 624-4226 or henne011@umn.edu.

It has been a great semester working with Extension on a project that afforded me the opportunity to bring county officials' perspectives to the table. Now, I am packing my bags to continue my studies at the University of Vienna in Austria. I will be participating in the Good Governance Consortium and maybe finding a good schnitzel restaurant or two. ■