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Making Room at the Table: Enhancing Public Participation in Economic Development Process

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MAKING ROOM AT THE TABLE:
ENHANCING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES

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Executive Summary

In 2011, Mohawk Valley EDGE became the lead organization for the Mohawk Valley Regional Economic Development Council (MVREDC), one of ten Regional Councils established in New York State. Public participation has been stressed as an essential function of all Regional Council processes. But throughout the 2012 Regional Council process, the MVREDC and EDGE had difficulty in soliciting feedback in implementing the regional strategic plan. This study examines how EDGE can foster more public engagement in local economic development.

I performed a document analysis and conducted a series of twelve telephone interviews in order to identify the most common and most useful methods of public participation utilized by other Regional Councils. Six findings emerged from the data: (1) "top performer" funding was not contingent on a Regional Council's level of public participation; (2) while some innovative methods are used among Regional Councils, currently, more emphasis is placed on traditional methods of engaging the public; (3) while no formal criteria were used for identifying key stakeholders, interviewees believed their Regional Council is doing the best it can to reach relevant populations; (4) input from the public has been mostly validating and legitimizing, as opposed to shaping the direction of the process in a collaborative way; (5) confidentiality generally has not been a problem within the Regional Council process; and (6) budgetary and time constraints were described as the biggest barriers to effective public dialogue.

From the findings, three recommendations emerged that EDGE may consider implementing. These include: (1) continue to utilize face-to-face methods of engagement, such as public forums and targeted stakeholder meetings in the Regional Council; (2) expand the role

of work groups in the Mohawk Valley Regional Council; and (3) continue to use social media as

an outreach method that will minimize budgetary and time constraints.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Problem Statement

Mohawk Valley Economic Development and Growth Enterprises (EDGE) is a 501 (c)(3) (nonprofit) organization that engages in economic development in Oneida and Herkimer Counties in Upstate New York. These two counties, which make up the Utica-Rome metropolitan statistical area, have a total population of just under 300,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). EDGE aims to be part of a long-term effort by the public and private sectors to strengthen regional economic opportunities by providing financing and assistance packages to businesses interested in locating or expanding their operations in the Mohawk Valley. Assistance provided includes helping companies find suitable buildings and shovel-ready sites for numerous types of industrial and commercial endeavors. Additionally, EDGE promotes the region's work force, infrastructure, sites, and quality of life through outlets such as conferences, publications, and social media. EDGE facilitates economic development as an independent organization; however, it is also a contracted service provider for several other development entities.

In 2011, EDGE became the lead organization for the Mohawk Valley Regional Economic Development Council (one of ten Regional Councils established in New York State), which was part of New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo's "New York Open for Business" economic development program. The total population of the Mohawk Valley region is just under 500,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Throughout the 2012 Mohawk Valley Regional Economic Development Council (MVREDC) process, it was difficult for the Regional Council in general and Mohawk Valley EDGE specifically to effectively solicit public participation and feedback in implementing the region's strategic plan.

Public participation, as indicated by the state, is stressed as an essential function of all Regional Council processes ("Regional Council Guidebook," 2011). During the 2012 round of

Regional Council funding, the MVREDC used several strategies to encourage public participation. These strategies include: surveys of business leaders, government officials, and the public; consolidated funding application (CFA) workshops; county-specific work committees; public speaking engagements; and press releases. These activities are similar to ones conducted in other regional councils. However, participation was lower for the MVREDC compared to the other councils in the state. For example, EDGE facilitated five CFA workshops, which were attended by less than 350 people. By comparison, the Mid-Hudson Council had more than 550 attendees at its seven CFA workshops during 2012. Additionally, the MVREDC involved the public through 25 speaking engagements during 2012. These engagements averaged roughly 25 attendees each, for a total of about 625 attendees (J. Waters, personal communication, Nov. 20, 2012). When compared against the speaking engagements of other Regional Councils though, the MVREDC had room for improvement. For example, the Western New York Council reached more than 1,200 individuals through 30 speaking engagements, while the Long Island Council reached nearly 1,300 individuals at 19 speaking engagements during 2012. By not having higher levels of public participation, both EDGE and the MVREDC risk wasting resources on strategies and processes that have little meaningful impact on the community and also risk the possibility of unproductive partnerships.

Public participation and feedback is an important aspect of economic development in any community. This is especially true for Oneida and Herkimer Counties which EDGE serves directly and for the broader Mohawk Valley region which EDGE serves through the MVREDC. Many cities and villages in the region have experienced economic hardship in the wake of the manufacturing exodus from the Northeast during the second half of the 20th century. Obtaining meaningful feedback will help EDGE mitigate the effects of this exodus which are still being

felt. Often times, the individuals of a community have the greatest knowledge about what is needed to improve their own economic situations. However if EDGE does not receive sufficient input from the community, there may end up being a disconnect between public interest and the plans EDGE develops, limiting EDGE's organizational effectiveness. A lack of public feedback could mean that EDGE is attracting potential industry clusters that do not match the needs or skill sets of the community. It may also mean that EDGE is distributing loans, grants, and/or tax credits in a way that will not provide meaningful employment or growth opportunities. Furthermore, public feedback is important so that EDGE can measure its performance and evaluate strategies for improvement.

The benefits of enhanced public participation go beyond EDGE as a single organization. In order to experience successful and meaningful development in any location, economic development organizations need participation and input from the community. Doing so will help the community create a unique identity for itself and set itself apart from competing areas (Blakely & Leigh, 2010). By finding ways to improve public participation in economic development, entities engaging in economic development (whether local governments or nonprofits) may increase the legitimacy of their actions within the communities, while also showing a greater appreciation of some core values of public administration. These core values include economic development organizations being able to demonstrate: (1) the effectiveness of their actions, by giving citizens the opportunity to give feedback about the value of the development being done; (2) their transparency, by providing opportunities for dynamic and interactive communication; (3) their concern for equity, by allowing development officials to determine the most useful and meaningful ways to address economic disparities in the

community; and (4) their responsiveness, by allowing development officials to adjust strategies according to the input and feedback from those feeling its effects.

Considering the importance of public participation in economic development processes, my capstone will research:

- How can EDGE foster greater public engagement in local economic development?

Literature Review

Public Participation in Economic Development

Public participation is frequently identified as an important element in economic development. As Blakely and Leigh (2010) state, public engagement is necessary because the entire community is the "client base" of development. Whether initiated by professional economic developers or at the grassroots level, public participation in decision-making processes involves the coming together of many actors in order to incorporate new information and perspectives of all relevant interests (Primmer & Kyllönen, 2006). This means that reaching all relevant stakeholders, including the general public, members of the business community, and elected officials, is essential. As Friedman and Mason (2004) describe, the importance of these stakeholders is determined by their degree of power, legitimacy, and urgency. An organization or demographic possessing a high degree of any of these characteristics makes the inclusion of this organization or demographic more necessary. Additionally, special care must be given to include vulnerable and underrepresented demographics (Innes & Booher, 2000; Primmer & Kyllönen, 2006; Raco, 2000). By reviewing the goals of and barriers to public participation as well as some traditional and innovative ways to engage the public in economic development, this paper will be able to better evaluate how to enhance public participation at Mohawk Valley EDGE.

Goals and Barriers to Participation

An important goal of public participation is to erase the top-down, expert-driven decision-making perception in order to engage more citizens (Brun & Jolley, 2011). This overall goal may be realized by: (1) increasing public trust (McGuire, 2000; Raco, 2000; Shaffer, Deller, & Marcouiller 2006); (2) improving information and decision-making (Abelson et al, 2003; Gezci, 2007; Plein, Green, & Williams, 1998; Webler, Tuler, & Krueger, 2001); (3) enhancing public understanding of economic development processes (Brun & Jolley, 2011; Chia, 2011; Cooper, Bryer, & Meek, 2006; Innes & Booher, 2000); (4) creating more policy options (Brun & Jolley, 2011; Innes & Booher, 2000); (5) earning greater legitimacy (Cooper et al, 2006; Plein et al, 1998; Webler et al, 2001); and (6) increasing agency accountability (Lindblad, 2006; Plein et al, 1998; Webler et al, 2001).

However, while public participation is highly valued, there are often barriers that prevent processes from being fully participatory. Many of these barriers stem from citizen preferences and circumstances. Among the most prominent reasons for a lack of participation is what Friedman and Mason call "rational apathy" (2004). This describes the mentality in which the costs of participation, such as time to learn and act upon an issue, outweigh the perceived benefits of becoming involved (Cooper et al., 2006; Friedman & Mason, 2004; Webler et al., 2001). Aside from time considerations, some stakeholders may lack other resources necessary to participate, such as internet access or transportation (Tauxe, 1995). Those involved early on may also find that enthusiasm diminishes over time (Abelson et al, 2003; Plein et al., 1998; Tosun, 2006). This enthusiasm is often contingent on whether or not a citizen has a personal stake in an issue. Additionally, divisive issues themselves may discourage participation, since some interest groups may actively avoid conflict (Plein et al., 1998).

Other barriers may exist due to agency culture, policies, and practices. These include lack of public knowledge about the opportunity to participate and the matters being discussed. These barriers are often a result of the development agency doing a poor job conveying information to the public. Another barrier to public participation is economic development is very technical, complex, and often confidential in nature (Geczi, 2007). This confidentiality can result in the public not trusting development officials, businesses, and/or other interest groups. In order to address this lack of trust, leaders may meet individually with interest groups in a more labor-intensive effort to solicit input (Weinberg, 2000). Additionally, economic development agencies often have limited budgetary or human resources, putting further constraints on agency efforts for public input (Brun & Jolley, 2011). This can cause a development agency to rely on a single method of dialogue, which can alienate those who are more comfortable with other forms of communication (Chia, 2011). A final barrier to public participation may be that the culture within an economic development agency places little emphasis on public participation (Cooper et al., 2006; Reese & Rosenfeld, 2001).

Traditional Methods of Public Participation

Although barriers exist, a number of benefits may be realized through the implementation of "traditional" methods of public participation. Formal public meetings or forums are usually prescribed by law as a prerequisite to development and provide an opportunity to obtain new information and viewpoints (Chia, 2011; Weinberg, 2000; Primmer & Kyllönen, 2006; Reese & Rosenfeld, 2001). This is seen as a way to legitimize the actions of the development agency and develop familiarity among the public with proposed policies. However, the formality of this method can make individuals uncomfortable with participating. Citizen-based commissions give more theoretical power to citizens, as legitimate and binding decisions are made, while members

become knowledgeable in the process (Innes & Booher, 2000; Webler et al., 2001). However only a handful of citizens are appointed to these bodies, and they are often hand-picked by public officials, making such commissions just a stamp of approval. Similar to citizen commissions, working groups make effort to include outside perspectives in the policy development process, but those involved are often professionals experienced in a particular area expertise (Primmer & Kyllönen, 2006).

Other traditional methods involve the public in the decision-making process but do not necessarily provide citizens with opportunities for active participation. For example, focus groups and surveys are two methods commonly used to help assess preferences and priorities of citizens in the planning process (Brun & Jolley, 2011). Public officials can use these methods to collect detailed data, but the public is detached from actual policy formation and approval. Information distribution through media such as newspapers and television helps inform citizens and facilitate conversation. However, this method tends to be a static one-way exchange of information, rather than dynamic and collaborative. While officials describe the various methods described in this section as legitimizing and democratic, they may also privately see these processes as a nuisance (Chia, 2011; Innes & Booher, 2000).

Innovative Methods of Public Participation

Researchers have argued that the traditional methods of public participation detailed in the previous section do not work, or at least are not truly participatory (Innes & Booher, 2000). As an alternative to more traditional methods, economic development professionals have increasingly begun to adopt several innovative approaches to involving the public in recent years. Prior to engaging relevant individuals, a stakeholder analysis can be useful to identify and encourage particular groups that may be important in achieving outcomes (Friedman & Mason,

2004). Another new approach is the topic-specific task force, consisting of participants from the general public, the business community, and the economic development field. These entities differ from citizen panels and work groups in that they take an active role in policy creation, rather than policy approval and have some level of permanency (Abelson et al., 2003; Brun & Jolley, 2011). Community development partnerships, involving nonprofits, local government, and academia are also increasingly popular and facilitate communication to help decision makers understand constituent viewpoints, while helping the public understand what is and isn't possible (Gittell, 1990; Innes & Booher, 2000; Raco, 2000). Planning charrettes are another relatively new method to economic development, in which various stakeholders collaboratively develop community objectives and strategies for land use planning or development prioritization (Innes & Booher, 2000). These differ from focus groups, in that participants are seen more as colleagues rather than test subjects, and a sense of shared policy ownership results. Lastly, online engagement and social media offer new ways to encourage public participation. This avenue is increasingly attractive as an opportunity to spread and gain information easily, quickly, and cheaply (Chia, 2011; Codack & Moule, 2011). However, Innes and Booher also caution that the internet lacks the authenticity of dialogue that can come through in-person discussions (2000).

Utilizing any number of these methods described in this literature will help give stakeholders greater responsibility in policy decision-making. Based on this review of literature, this study will now evaluate the extent and usefulness of these and other methods of public participation in economic development practice.

Methodology

This section explains the way in which data for this project was collected and analyzed. I provide a rationale for these methods I used and explain the strengths and limitations of my research design.

Data Collection

In order to better understand the extent of public participation in the regional economic development councils, two methods of data collection were used: document analysis and interviews. Each of the ten New York State Regional Economic Development Councils produces a large amount of data each year through record-keeping of public engagement events, as prescribed by the state. Among these documents are annual official publications submitted to the state and documents with summaries of public meetings and other activities. I found these documents on each regional council's web page. Analyzing these documents allowed me to compare the level of public participation in each region. Additionally, reviewing these documents enabled me to analyze how closely each region's strategies and objectives reflect the preferences and viewpoints provided by citizens. This document analysis informed the selection of interviewees.

To supplement this document analysis, I conducted a series of phone interviews with council members from four regions. Of these four regions, two were identified in my document analysis as having a particularly high level of public participation, and two were identified as having a particularly low level of public participation. I then contacted the executive directors of each targeted regional council and asked them to participate in a short interview. Their contact information was found on New York State's Empire State Development website. During this initial recruiting, I also asked these individuals to forward my interview request to members from

their councils who have backgrounds in academia, in business leadership, and in professional economic development. This selection process was used in order to learn the perspectives of council members with diverse professional experiences. While I asked each targeted executive director to forward my request, I also began seeking out and contacting council members that had the professional backgrounds for which I was looking. I obtained names and places of employment for the council members from regional council documents and each council's website. I used this information to find each targeted council member's contact information and then reached out to them via email. This targeted approach to interviews helped me identify what led to successful efforts in some councils and what caused some efforts to be less successful. Each council consists of a number of elected officials; however, I did not target any of these ex-officio members because political biases might have influenced their responses. In all, a total of 30 council members from four of New York's Regional Economic Development Councils were contacted, and 12 individuals agreed to participate in an interview.

Interviews were semi-structured and open ended. Each interview lasted between 20-35 minutes. Complete confidentiality was maintained with all interviewees. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix B. I created the interview questions based on themes from the literature review, as well as information drawn from the document analysis. Interviewees were asked about the types of public participation methods used, the success of methods used, and the overall usefulness of the public input received. Each interviewee was asked to discuss the barriers to public participation experienced within each region. A list of interview questions can be found in Appendix C.

Prior to conducting these interviews, I received approval for my study from the Human Subjects Research Review Committee of Binghamton University through the Research Study

Protocol Submission Process (See Appendix A). This process is required of all projects that use humans as test subjects and is followed in order to ensure sound ethical practices.

Strengths and Limitations

My mixed methodology is an appropriate way to answer the research question because of the amount of data that can be gathered and analyzed. This combination of document analysis and interviews allowed for a greater potential for in-depth analysis. With more than 175 documents retrieved online from the councils' websites, a document analysis was the logical starting point to determine which participation methods worked, which did not, and how useful they were in capturing the preferences and perspectives of those involved. One unique component of my methodology was that the document analysis was used to determine who would be targeted for interviews. By using the available documents to establish a rough ranking of participation success, I was able to target those regions that demonstrated particularly successful methods and those that had the most room for improvement.

This approach to interviewing was also a strength, because gaining perspectives from top performers and bottom performers may help identify which participation methods might be emulated and which might be avoided or altered. Interviewing council members from two top performers and two bottom performers may also help identify commonalities across regions, whereas interviewing council members from just one top- and bottom-performer could limit generalizability of responses.

Although my research design has several strengths, there are also certain limitations associated with it. While each region has been required to annually submit a strategic plan and subsequent action plans, the amount of other publicly available documents regarding public participation varied from council to council. This means that since some regions have posted

many documents on their website while others have posted very few. As a result, I may have excluded valuable pieces of information from my document analysis. Additionally, while the analyzed documents were useful in providing quantitative and qualitative data, one inherent limitation of document analysis is that some elements of public engagement cannot be fully captured in writing. Furthermore, some meeting minutes were recorded in greater detail than others. Some regions recorded the number of attendees at each public engagement, while others gave estimates and still others gave no indication of public presence. Some regions recorded specific comments from the public, while others just mentioned that a portion of the meeting was devoted to public comment.

Conducting interviews similarly provides rich data, with the added benefit of being able to clarify questions and answers. However, some limitations of phone interviews in particular are that there may be a bias in responses, as participants may be more likely to give their council's a positive evaluation and ignore, minimize, or hide problems with their public participation process. Some interviewees also had a great deal of familiarity with the public participation methods and processes used, while others did not have much familiarity. This limited the usefulness of some responses from some interviewees. Additionally, since public participation is an expected component of a democratic society, and regarded highly in public affairs, interviewees may have been reluctant to provide answers highlighting negative experiences that they have had with public participation and/or negative perceptions they may have about public participation.

One final limitation of this project is that the regions evaluated have different geographic and demographic characteristics. Each region has certain industry clusters that they rely upon, which may sustain a certain demographic or breed a certain culture of civic engagement not

found in other areas of the state. This means that the findings drawn from this data collection and analysis may not all be applicable to other regions.

Data Analysis

In all, I analyzed over 175 documents from the ten regional councils to gauge the amount of public participation. Using 22 indicators across two years of documents, these regions were ranked by how they performed within each indicator. There were ten indicators for the 2011 Regional Economic Development Council (REDC) process, ten indicators for the 2012 REDC process, and two indicators that were not time-bound. Some of these indicators include: (1) number of private citizens included in council work groups; (2) number of public forums held; (3) number of social media followers; and (4) the presence of "unique" participation methods. I selected these indicators by using the minimum public engagement components established by the Regional Economic Development Council Strategic Planning Manual and by using themes found in my literature review. The minimum requirements allowed for a certain level of comparability, while themes from the literature enabled me to analyze utilization of more innovative methods. A complete list of indicators can be found in the Appendix. Rankings, with each indicator weighted evenly, were then compiled to determine how regions performed compared to one another.

I then conducted another review, in which the opinions presented by citizens within these documents were compared to what strategies and priorities were adopted in each region's strategic plan and action plan. This qualitative analysis helped me determine how closely regional priorities reflected the priorities of participating citizens. This comparison revealed whether or not the participation methods being employed had an impact on the policies being

developed. I used this analysis to classify the regional councils according to the level of their public participation.

I analyzed the interview data using thematic analysis which focused on identifying common themes in responses among all interviewees. Key themes I identified were general opinions on the success of particular participation methods, plans to incorporate new methods or improve on current methods, and perceptions about barriers to participation. The analysis of this data was used to inform the findings and recommendations.

Findings

Based on a document analysis and thematic coding of interview responses, six findings emerged. These include: (1) "top performer" funding, as awarded by New York State, was not contingent on a Regional Council's level of public participation; (2) while some innovative methods are used among Regional Councils, currently, more emphasis is placed on traditional methods of engaging the public; (3) interviewees provided no formal criteria for identifying key stakeholders and had mixed beliefs about their Regional Councils' ability to reach relevant populations; (4) input from the public has been mostly validating and legitimizing, as opposed to shaping the direction of the process in a collaborative way; (5) confidentiality generally has not been a problem within the Regional Council process; and (6) budgetary and time constraints were described as the biggest barriers to effective public dialogue. While two high-performing regions and two low-performing regions were targeted for interviewing, no clear differentiation in responses was noticed between high- and low- performers.

Finding #1: "Top Performer" funding, as awarded by New York State, was not contingent on a Regional Council's level of public participation.

Upon completing my document analysis and ranking of the ten Regional Economic Development Councils (Regional Councils) in New York State, by level of public participation, there seemed to be no relationship between the amount of funding awarded to each region and its level of public participation. Each year, a select number of Regional Councils are designated as "top performers" by the State. These top performers are awarded an additional sum of prize money for economic development projects. This award is made based on a region's progress in implementing its strategic plan. According to my document analysis and ranking of Regional Councils, success of public participation methods is not related to identification as a "top performer," or receipt of the associated prize money. This is because the Regional Councils that were designated as winners in both years were ranked lower than Regional Councils that were not chosen as winners in either year and others that were designated winners in just one year. "Losing" Regional Councils were not all ranked lowly based on my document analysis; likewise, Regional Councils that have been selected as winners were not all ranked highly.

Finding #2: While some innovative methods are used among Regional Councils, currently, more emphasis is placed on traditional methods of engaging the public.

Upon review of the documents made available by each of the Regional Councils, there were many similarities in the methods used by each council. This is exhibited in Table 1, which displays the types of methods used by the ten Regional Councils, as described in Council documents. This is due in large part to minimum requirements for public participation that have been established by the State. Some of these minimum requirements include the Councils must

have public meetings, public forums, and static web pages, which are all considered traditional

methods. However, each Regional Council has also used innovative, collaborative methods to

engage the public. Some of these methods include work groups, Consolidated Funding

Application (CFA) workshops, and social media sites such as Facebook. Although literature has

described work groups as a traditional method of public engagement because they are comprised

mostly of focus-area experts (Innes & Booher, 2000), these work groups as described by

interviewees were more innovative and seem to resemble topic-specific task forces because of

their diverse membership, active role in strategy development, and levels of permanency

(Abelson et al., 2003).

Table 1: Number of Regional Councils using a particular method (out of 10)

Document Analysis: Methods Used			
Traditional		Innovative/Collaborative	
Open Council Meetings	10*	Work Groups	10*
Public Forums	10*	Social Media	7**
Council Web Site	10*	Planning Charrettes	0
Public Surveys	7	CFA Workshops	7
Focus Groups	2		
Traditional Media Outreach	10		
Individual Networking/Outreach	4		
* Minimum requirement by New York State			
** One more Regional Council is developing a social media presence			

My document analysis indicates that social media is being underutilized by all ten

Regional Councils in New York State. At the time of the document analysis, seven Regional

Councils used at least one form of social media, as shown in Table 1. Interviewees from one low

performing Regional Council indicated that a Facebook page was in the process of being

launched this year. While many councils are using a form of social media, my analysis suggests

that they are not maximizing its potential. For example, the social media sites for each Regional

Council have a small reach, in terms of number of "likes" or "followers," when compared to the population of each region. Total connections ("likes" and "followers") ranged from just over 50 to less than 250.

I also asked interviewees about the types of participation methods used. Table 2 tallies the responses to this question by Regional Council. While certain methods were required by all regions, some of these were not identified by interviewees. For example, each Regional Council had a web site, but interviewees from only two Regional Councils spoke about this method of outreach. These interviews also revealed that within one Regional Council, collaborative break-out sessions were conducted at public forums. When described, this resembled the planning charrettes described by Innes and Booher (2000).

Table 2: Number of targeted Regional Councils identifying a particular method (out of 4)

Interview Responses: Methods Used			
Traditional		Innovative	
Open Council Meetings	4*	Work Groups	4*
Public Forums	3*	Social Media	3**
Council Web Site	2*	Planning Charrettes	1
Public Surveys	2	CFA Workshops	2
Focus Groups	0		
Traditional Media Outreach	4		
Individual Networking/Outreach	3		
* Minimum requirement by New York State ** One more Regional Council is developing a social media presence			

Table 3: Number of targeted Regional Councils describing a particular method as important (out of 4)

Interview Responses: Most Useful Methods			
Traditional		Innovative	
Open Council Meetings	3	Work Groups	1 (H)
Public Forums	3	Social Media	1 (H)
Council Web Site	0	Planning Charrettes	1 (L)
Public Surveys	1 (L)	CFA Workshops	2 (H)
Focus Groups	0		
Traditional Media Outreach	1 (L)		
Individual Networking/Outreach	1 (L)		
Key: H- high performers only; L- low performers only			

Interviewees were also asked to describe the most useful methods of public participation used by their Regional Council. Analysis of interview responses showed that overall there was some, but not a lot of consensus on the most useful methods, both across regions and within regions. However, one theme that was prominent was open meetings and forums were useful in creating and sustaining dialogue between the Council and the public. In all, five respondents from three Regional Councils expressed this sentiment. This is shown in Table 3, which lists the participation methods described as most useful for each targeted Regional Council. As stated by one interviewee from academia, "face to face sustained dialogue is the most useful method. When there is genuine dialogue, as opposed to a survey or comment sheet, it's not simply stating opinions; it's having conversations that lead to the development and evolution of ideas, which leads to a more accurate reflection of regional priorities." This table also shows that out of the five traditional participation methods identified as "most useful," three of them were identified as such by low performing Regional Councils. Conversely, out of the four innovative methods identified as "most useful," three were identified as such by high performers. While several interviewees highlighted the usefulness of this public dialogue, document analysis showed that

there was a large drop-off among all regions in reported attendance at public meetings and forums. In 2011, available documents reported total attendance across all ten regions to be over 5300. In 2012, though, the reported number fell to below 4000.

Putting a collaborative spin on the traditional public forum, one interviewee from business leadership spoke of their Regional Council's public forums and how each one revolved around a specific topic. At these forums, attendees broke into small facilitated discussion groups, so that individuals could share ideas easier and in a less intimidating setting. These smaller discussion groups resemble charrettes, as described by Innes & Booher, in which stakeholders collaboratively create objectives and strategies for development prioritization (2000).

Table 4: Number of interviewees describing a particular method as important (out of 12)

Interview Responses: Most Useful Methods			
Traditional		Innovative	
Open Council Meetings	5	Work Groups	4 (H)
Public Forums	3	Social Media	2
Council Web Site	0	Planning Charrettes	1 (L)
Public Surveys	1 (L)	CFA Workshops	2 (H)
Focus Groups	0		
Traditional Media Outreach	1 (L)		
Individual Networking/Outreach	1 (L)		
Key: H- from high performers only; L- from low performers only			

In addition, all four interviewees from one high-performing region remarked about the effectiveness of its work groups, with one interviewee from academia saying that they have been "incredibly effective" as "boots on the ground to feed the Council with information." This is shown in Table 4, which breaks down the responses of all twelve interviewees to the question about the most useful methods of public participation for their Regional Council. This individual went on to say that if the Regional Council process ended, some work groups would continue to meet and address regional issues. Interviewees from this region all noted the high rate of

participation within its work groups, as well as the frequency of their meetings. These work groups engage in evaluating sector needs and in developing strategies to address these needs and are comprised of citizens who are active in these sectors or leaders within the community. According to the interviews, work groups were organized around key regional sectors, as well as key regional issues such as infrastructure and workforce development. The work done by these groups, as described by interviewees, contributed to the overall effectiveness of the public participation plan of the region. One interviewee from the other high performing region also indicated that the role of their work groups will likely expand during the coming cycle. This interviewee stated that "there's an opportunity for these work groups to 're-group,' and an opportunity to create new work groups and engage them in planning and goal development." Work group participation among all regions ranged from less than 30 public participants to more than 200. Both targeted high performer Regional Councils fell on the higher end of this scale.

Another important way to inform and engage the public, as described by both high performing Regional Councils, is through Consolidated Funding Application (CFA) workshops. Facilitating these workshops informs potential applicants on how much money is available for certain types of projects, as well as how to navigate the CFA. One interviewee from business leadership described how a lack of strong projects from applicants in the first year of the process demonstrated the need to educate the public about the CFA process and to increase efforts to solicit "great" projects. This Regional Council demonstrated success in its CFA workshops, because in the second year, it had a significantly higher number of CFAs submitted.

Finding #3: Interviewees provided no formal criteria for identifying key stakeholders and had mixed beliefs about their Regional Councils' ability to reach relevant populations.

According to interviewees, stakeholders have not been identified in a systematic way. No interviewee described formal criteria or characteristics for identifying key stakeholders, as for example, Friedman and Mason (2004) have done. Instead, the most common response was that stakeholder identification was done, at least in part, at the State level. This is not necessarily surprising, because New York State was responsible for selecting Regional Council membership. In all, responses from three Regional Councils indicated that New York State identified key stakeholders. One interviewee from business leadership explained that "stakeholder identification was built into the council through the individuals selected to serve on the council; economic development organizations represented their constituents, politicians represented their constituents, and so on." Responses describing the State's means of stakeholder identification indicated that aside from membership selection, Empire State Development and other State offices did additional outreach.

In addition, three Regional Councils identified stakeholders through the formation of work groups. For example, upon the establishment of one high performing Regional Council, key industry sectors were identified in order to bring relevant stakeholders to the table. Once these work groups were established, as one interviewee from academia explained, participants then use their networks to further reach out to the members of the public and enhance participation.

Aside from industry sector representation, two of the four targeted regions also considered geographic representation concerns as part of identifying relevant stakeholders. These responses came from one high performer and one low performer. As one interviewee from professional economic development stated, "the biggest challenge is making sure all groups feel represented in the process. Geographic diversity is especially important, and the biggest thing

that we focus on [in terms of stakeholders]." Ensuring representation is important, especially in regions with one dominant population center, so that stakeholders throughout the region have a sense of ownership in the process, which helps create a sense of unity.

Although no formal criteria were provided for stakeholder identification, five of the twelve interviewees thought that their Regional Council's methods used were effective in reaching relevant stakeholders. These responses came from only two of the four targeted regions: one high performer and one low performer. While some interviewees perceived that they were effective in reaching all relevant stakeholders, my document analysis showed that only one region in New York State made bilingual outreach a formal part of its public participation plan.

In contrast, four interviewees representing three regions thought that despite their best efforts, their Regional Councils can never reach everyone. As one interviewee from academia stated, "The Regional Council can never reach everyone, but an honest effort was made and reasonable opportunity was provided to a sufficient number of people to become involved."

Finding #4: Input from the public has been mostly validating and legitimizing, as opposed to shaping the direction of the process in a collaborative way.

My document analysis evaluated how closely each region's strategic plan and progress report reflected the input received from the public, as demonstrated by documents made available on each Regional Council's website. While each Regional Council did well in reflecting the public's will in its strategic plan and progress report, a document analysis could not determine if these ideas from the public came before or after a strategic framework had been established. Therefore, interviewees were asked how useful the public's input was and in what way. A comparison of responses showed that five of the twelve interviewees saw public input

most useful in a reinforcing and validating way. On the other hand, only two interviewees explicitly talked about re-aligning regional strategies as a result of public input. As one interviewee from professional economic development stated, "the input from the public was useful in validating what the region's priorities were. The council didn't find too many startling pieces of information that would have caused a shift in focus, but the information did help in prioritizing regional strategies."

While several interviewees saw public input as mostly validating, just one interviewee from a business leadership background spoke about altering their Council's approach so that a more collaborative use of input takes place. According to this respondent, "the first round [of the Regional Council process] was difficult for receiving quality input due to time constraints; so the public was used as a sounding board. The council moved from sounding board to co-creating in the second year because of time flexibility, so that decisions were being driven by the public in a co-authorship manner."

Finding #5: Confidentiality generally has not been a problem within the Regional Council process.

Although literature suggests that the technical and confidential nature of economic development limits the usefulness of public input (Geczi, 2007), a review of interview responses has not shown confidentiality to be an issue, at least within the Regional Council process. When asked about the role of confidentiality in public participation, nine of the twelve interviewees, representing three regions, indicated it did not affect the usefulness of public input. The public is mostly involved in the formation of the strategic plan and subsequent action plans and work group plans, while State agencies and council members are responsible for reviewing specific

projects to determine funding awards. The only time confidentiality becomes an issue is when council members are voting on priority projects. Some interviewees acknowledged that confidentiality *can* affect public input, but in these cases, codenames may be given to projects and applicants, or projects may be taken "out of cycle" and sent directly to the appropriate State agency. As one interviewee from a business leadership background stated, "as long as that's the exception and not the rule, confidentiality becomes moot."

Finding #6: Budgetary and time constraints were described as the biggest barriers to effective public dialogue.

When asked what the biggest barrier(s) was to effective public dialogue, five interviewees representing three regions responded that budgetary constraints were the most significant hurdle. Regional Councils operate without any funding from New York State. All council members serve essentially as volunteers, and resources come either through council members and their organizations or through CFA funding. This lack of resources limits the ability to spread the Regional Council's message and to attract more participants. One interviewee from a business leadership background noted that unless the media is willing to collaborate with the Regional Council for free, the message cannot be spread using traditional media methods.

Five of the twelve interviewees also spoke of time constraints, both for council members and the public, as a barrier to sustained dialogue. One professional economic developer pointed out that "council members are professionals with other priorities… and this is a very arduous process," while one interviewee from academia noted that the Regional Council's biggest challenge is "competition against other demands [of individuals], and in getting and keeping

people's attention. It is hard to get people to drive away to a meeting and have a conversation when other events are going on in their lives." This supports Friedman and Mason's contention that "rational apathy" plays a significant role in the level of public involvement (2004). These two responses demonstrate that time is a significant consideration for both the public and council members.

Furthermore, three interviewees from two high performing regions found that getting people to embrace a regional perspective was a significant barrier in effective dialogue. This is a new approach to economic development in New York State, in that it is regional rather than local. One interviewee from academia stated that projects seeking funding or "priority" status are often identified by local economic development professionals within the council. These professionals are representing their own counties and will advocate for their own county's projects. Another interviewee from academia looked at this issue from a funding perspective: "If a lot of award money is funneled to one area of the region, it can create a biased perception or a sense of animosity between counties." This can be especially true in regions with one dominant population center, where projects may be more readily available, or of benefit to more people.

Recommendations

The goal of this research project was to identify ways to enhance public participation in economic development. This was done through an analysis of available documents and through a series of interviews about experiences with New York State's Regional Economic Development Council process. Based on the findings from my data analysis, I am providing three recommendations to Mohawk Valley EDGE. These recommendations include: 1) continue to utilize face-to-face methods of engagement, such as public forums and targeted stakeholder

meetings in the Regional Council; 2) expand the role of work groups in the Mohawk Valley

Regional Council; and 3) continue to use social media as an outreach method that will minimize

budgetary and time constraints.

Recommendation #1: Continue to utilize face-to-face methods of engagement, such as

public forums and Consolidated Funding Application workshops in the Regional Council.

According to Finding #2, five interviewees remarked about the usefulness of public

forums and other speaking engagements during the Regional Council process. Forums, if

managed properly, can be an excellent way of educating the public, creating authentic dialogue,

and building social capital. To achieve these results, forums cannot operate as just sounding

boards, but must utilize participants as colleagues and collaborators. By following the example

of the one Regional Council that had topic-specific forums with small facilitated discussion

groups, the Mohawk Valley Regional Council will be allowing attendees to share ideas in a

collaborative way.

Another useful way to inform and engage the public is through CFA workshops.

Generally, all State funding for economic development projects is now awarded through the CFA

process. This means that businesses, nonprofits, and governments must all understand the

application process. According to Finding #2, both high performing Regional Councils indicated

that these workshops were an effective way of engaging and informing the public and also a way

to identify strong economic development projects for their regions. Facilitating these workshops

will inform potential applicants on how much money is available for certain types of projects, as

well as how to navigate the CFA. When more people become informed about the CFA process,

this will likely increase the number of people seeking funding and therefore the chance of

receiving more funding for diverse projects. Furthermore, facilitating discussions at CFA workshops to communicate how projects relate to the strategic plan will further help in the implementation of regional strategies and objectives.

Recommendation #2: Expand the role of work groups in the Mohawk Valley Regional Council.

Following the lead of one of the high-performing regions, I recommend that the role of work groups be expanded in the Mohawk Valley Regional Council. As indicated in Finding #2, interviewees from one high performer revealed that work groups were organized around key regional sectors and key regional issues. Interviewees from this high performing Regional Council explained that the work done by these groups contributed to the overall effectiveness of the public participation plan of the region. Among the high performing Regional Councils, one consistently remarked about their effectiveness, while the other noted the opportunity for greater usefulness in the coming year.

Following the lead of these targeted regions, establishing more work groups that focus on key regional sectors and issues will help the Mohawk Valley Regional Council get a more detailed perspective of issues and priorities facing key stakeholders. Reaching out to citizens to become involved in these groups will also help expand the Regional Council's network and develop the social and intellectual capital needed to address these priorities and issues.

Recommendation #3: Continue to use social media as an outreach method that will minimize budgetary and time constraints.

As mentioned in Finding #6, five of the twelve interviewees cited budgetary constraints as a significant barrier to public dialogue. Regional Councils are trying to engage the public without any formal budget. As a result, Regional Councils need to find low-cost and no-cost methods of getting their message out. Social media is one such way. Literature describes social media as an increasingly important opportunity to spread and gain information easily, quickly, and cheaply (Chia, 2011; Codack & Moule, 2011). However, my document analysis in Finding #2 indicates that social media is being underutilized by all ten Regional Councils in New York State.

When ranked against the other Regional Councils, the Mohawk Valley is ahead of most other Regional Councils in terms of the number of its connections (Facebook "likes" and Twitter "followers"). The Regional Council should build on this and continue to utilize and emphasize social media as a significant method of informing the public and creating dialogue. This includes promoting social media pages to increase the number of connections, and frequently creating opportunities for discussion through outreach such as status posts, tweets, and photos. This will keep the public more informed and engaged, while limiting the monetary and time costs associated with public outreach. It will also be useful in engaging younger demographics, which have a particularly large stake in the economic future of the region.

Conclusion

Public participation has been identified as an essential component throughout New York State's Regional Economic Development Council process. The findings and recommendations that emerged from this study may be used to identify the most relevant and useful ways for Mohawk Valley EDGE to enhance public participation through the Regional Council process.

By fostering greater public engagement in local economic development, both within the Regional Council process and in organizational outreach, Mohawk Valley EDGE may realize the benefits of greater effectiveness and responsiveness. Fostering greater public participation will help the community that EDGE is serving create an identity for itself and set itself apart from competing areas. This will also help the community develop the social and intellectual capital necessary to realize long-term economic growth.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Human Subjects Research Approval

Date: March 6, 2013

To: Timothy Fitzgerald, CCPA

From: Anne M. Casella, CIP Administrator
                             Human Subjects Research Review Committee

Subject: Human Subjects Research Approval
                             Protocol Number: 2225-13
                             Protocol title: *Enhancing Public participation in Economic Development*
        Processes

Your project identified above was reviewed by the HSRRC and has received an Exempt approval pursuant to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) regulations, 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) .

An exempt status signifies that you will not be required to submit a Continuing Review application as long as your project involving human subjects remains unchanged. If your project undergoes any changes these changes must be reported to our office prior to implementation. Please complete the modification form found at the following link: http://research.binghamton.edu/Compliance/humansubjects/COEUS_Docs.php

Principal Investigators or any individual involved in the research must report any problems involving the conduct of the study or subject participation. Any problems involving recruitment and consent processes or any deviations from the approved protocol should be reported in writing within five (5) business days as outlined in Binghamton University, Human Subjects Research Review Office, Policy and Procedures IX.F.1 Unanticipated Problems/adverse events/complaints. We require that the Unanticipated Problems/adverse events/complaints form be submitted to our office, found at the following link: http://research.binghamton.edu/Compliance/humansubjects/COEUS_Docs.php

University policy requires you to maintain as a part of your records, any documents pertaining to the use of human subjects in your research. This includes any information or materials conveyed to, and received from, the subjects, as well as any executed consent forms, data and analysis results. These records must be maintained for at least six years after project completion or termination. If this is a funded project, you should be aware that these records are subject to inspection and review by authorized representative of the University, State and Federal governments.

Please notify this office when your project is complete by completing and forwarding to our office the Protocol closure form found at the following link: http://research.binghamton.edu/Compliance/humansubjects/COEUS_Docs.php Upon notification

we will close the above referenced file. Any reactivation of the project will require a new application.

This documentation is being provided to you via email. A hard copy will not be mailed unless you request us to do so.

Thank you for your cooperation, I wish you success in your research, and please do not hesitate to contact our office if you have any questions or require further assistance.

cc: file
Kristina Lambright

Diane Bulizak, Secretary
Human Subjects Research Review Office
Biotechnology Building, Room 2205
Binghamton University
85 Murray Hill Rd.
Vestal, NY 13850
dbulizak@binghamton.edu
Telephone: (607) 777-3818
Fax: (607) 777-5025

Appendix B

List of Indicators in Document Analysis

2011 Indicators	2012 Indicators	Non-Time Bound Indicators
Number of Citizens on Council Work Groups	Number of Citizens on Council Work Groups	Social Media Connections (Facebook "likes" and Twitter "followers"), as of Feb. 22, 2013
Number of Public Surveys	Number of Public Surveys	Presence of a Public Participation Work Group, as of Feb. 22, 2013
(Total) Number of Surveys Responses	(Total) Number of Surveys Responses	
Number of Public Forums	Number of Public Forums	
(Total) Forum Attendance	(Total) Forum Attendance	
"Other Speaking Engagements"	"Other Speaking Engagements"	
"Strategic Stakeholder Outreach"	"Strategic Stakeholder Outreach"	
Number of CFA Workshops	Number of CFA Workshops	
Total CFA Workshop Attendance	Total CFA Workshop Attendance	
Mass Media Outreach	Mass Media Outreach	
"Unique" Methods	"Unique" Methods	

Appendix C

Initial Recruiting E-mail to Research Participants

To: [Email]
From: tfitzge1@binghamton.edu
Subject: Student Request for a Brief Phone Interview
Body:
Dear [Name],

Hi, my name is Timothy Fitzgerald. I am a graduate student in the final semester of by Master of Public Administration Degree at Binghamton University. In partial fulfillment of my degree, I am conducting my Capstone Seminar project on the effectiveness of public participation within the New York State Regional Economic Development Council process.

After reviewing the public participation documents posted on your regional council's website, I think your Council's public participation strategy tells an interesting story. As such, I am asking if you would be willing to participate in a phone interview with me so that I may learn a bit more about your Council's methods and success.

The interview will take 30-45 minutes, and will focus on your experience with and perceptions of the council process, regarding public participation. Complete confidentiality will be maintained in this project's final draft. To give you an idea of my time constraints, all interviews of mine must be completed by April 4th, 2013.

In order to compile a diverse set of perspectives, I am hoping to also interview an individual on your Council with a background in academia, an individual with a background in business leadership, and an individual with a background in professional economic development. Based on your knowledge of Council members' roles within the Regional Council, would you be willing to also forward this request to individuals who may be willing to help?

I appreciate your consideration, and I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,
Timothy Fitzgerald
Department of Public Administration
College of Community and Public Affairs
Binghamton University

Appendix D

Interview Oral Consent

Hello, I am a Tim Fitzgerald. I'm currently a student in the Master of Public Administration program at Binghamton University. I am conducting research about public participation in economic development, in partial fulfillment of the requirements of my Master's degree. Particularly, this project is evaluating public participation in the New York State Regional Economic Development Council process. I am conducting a series of telephone interviews with council members from selected regional council in the state, regarding their experience with and perceptions of the council process, regarding public participation.

You are being contacted because I saw you are a member on the (particular geographic region) Regional Economic Development Council, and through a review of your region's published documents, your region's public participation methods seem to tell an interesting story. Your background in (academia/ business leadership/ economic development) will provide a perspective that will be important in this research.

Your decision of whether or not to participate will not prejudice your future relations with Binghamton University. If you decide to participate, you are not obligated to answer all questions, and may stop at any time.

If you agree, I would like to ask you some questions about your experience with and perceptions of public participation in your Regional Council's processes the last two years. The survey should take roughly 30 to 45 minutes. Complete confidentiality will be maintained for this research project.

If you have any additional questions later, I will be happy to answer. Additionally, Dr. Kristina Lambright of the University's Department of Public Administration (607-777-9186) will be available to answer any other questions. If at any time you have questions concerning your rights as a research subject you may call Binghamton University's Human Subject's Research Review Committee at (607) 777-3818.

Do you have any questions about the research project? May I proceed with the first question?

Appendix E

Telephone Interview Instrument

1) Tell me about the different methods of public participation used by your regional council.

2) How did your council identify key stakeholders?

3) Do you think the methods used by your regional council were effective in reaching all relevant populations?

4) How useful did you find the input given from the public?

5) Has your council considered implementing any other methods of engaging the public? Or has your council considered ways to improve on current methods being used?

6) What do you see as the biggest barrier to effective public dialogue in economic development processes?

7) What, if any, impact does the technical and confidential nature of economic development have on the usefulness of public participation?

8) How do these public participation methods within the Regional Council process compare to the methods used in your employing organization? (This question is for Economic Development professionals)

9) What particular method(s) have you found most useful or successful in the regional council process?

10) How do you view the overall success of your council's methods of public participation?

Appendix F

Additional Recommendation to Mohawk Valley EDGE

Work to enhance public participation as a means of building social capital throughout the Mohawk Valley region.

An analysis of my data set indicates that the amount of award funding received from the State is not contingent on the extent of a Regional Council's methods and success of public participation. Since the field of economic development is very results-driven, one may then infer that pursuing greater input from the public would not be worth the effort. However, the results that economic developers are focusing on should go beyond the number of dollars obtained for projects. The Regional Council process serves as a catalyst to develop intellectual and social capital throughout the region. This capital is essential to identifying regional assets, and to identifying and addressing regional economic issues. One interviewee from academia pointed out that when there are consistent opportunities for authentic dialogue among the public, "it's not simply stating opinions; it's having conversations that lead to the development and evolution of ideas, which leads to a more accurate reflection of regional priorities." Furthermore, when people are more engaged and informed, as explained by one interviewee from business leadership, "public perception will change and policy will actually change; but people need to realize that their voice matters." This is consistent with the literature, which suggests greater public engagement will improve information and decision-making; enhance understanding of economic development processes; and create more policy options (Abelson et al, 2003; Brun & Jolley, 2011; Chia, 2011; Cooper et al, 2006; Innes & Booher, 2000; Webler et al, 2001). In an effort to build social capital through public participation, it will be important to employ methods that

utilize the public in a collaborative way. Finding ways to build intellectual and social capital

within the Mohawk Valley presents itself as an opportunity for potential future research.

Appendix G

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I extend a tremendous "thank you" to my family. To Mom and Dad, James and Taylor, Pete and Jen, and to Ryan, you all have continuously been a source of support, motivation, and comfort. To my parents, you both were always there when I needed to call home and vent my frustration with my work, or just to take a break and chat. To my brothers, you were always there for a good laugh or serious talk when I needed it. James, thank you for your service to our country. You all mean the world to me.

To all the professors of the program that I have had the pleasure and honor to work with, thank you all. From the very start, you have helped make my graduate studies enriching and enjoyable. You all have helped me learn more than I expected I would. A special thanks to Dr. Kristina Lambright for all of your help during the Capstone process, and to Dr. Thomas Sinclair for your help throughout the Capstone process and for your guidance during my time in the program. I am thankful to have had the opportunity to work for you and with you as your graduate assistant.

To my supervisors and colleagues at Mohawk Valley EDGE, I thank you for providing me the opportunity to work with you for my internship. I also thank you for helping me realize that economic development is a path I can consider as a career.

To my classmates- my colleagues; my friends: a huge thanks to all of you as well. I have made great friendships during my time in the program that I hope to continue long after we graduate. You all have also been a great source of support, motivation, and entertainment. I have learned just as much from you as I have from our professors, and you all have made my time in this program an enriching experience. I wish you all the best of luck in your future endeavors.

I do not have enough time or space to say thank you to all who have had a role in getting me to this point. So I will instead say to all my family, to my friends back home, and to my loved ones:
Thank you all.