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**PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN WATER PLANNING
IN SOUTH CAROLINA**

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IN SOUTH CAROLINA**

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Appendix A

Appendix A: Public Participation in Water Planning in South Carolina
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PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN WATER PLANNING IN SOUTH CAROLINA

This paper seeks to set out a proposal for involving the public in the South Carolina State water planning process. It does so by first considering the reasons for having citizen involvement in water planning, before moving on to the particular circumstances confronting South Carolina.

A discussion of why public participation is sometimes worth the considerable costs associated with it is necessary to an understanding of the merits of various methods of seeking public involvement, because (as Arnstein has pointed out) participation exercises can be genuine attempts to improve democratic policy-making or they can be cynical attempts to placate public concern, and how agencies organise the participation exercise will depend upon what their aims are. For the sake of brevity, we shall concern ourselves here only with the genuine reasons for participation, on the assumption that the aim of the exercise is not simply to assuage the public.

WHY PARTICIPATION?

There are four main reasons for engaging in a process of public participation: because of adherence to democratic norms; to gather information which the policy maker does not have or might not have; to obtain an indication of public preferences for goods which are not traded in the market; and to foster a clientele for the agency conducting the exercise.

Firstly, we can involve the public in the making of government decisions because of our adherence to democratic norms, and while the other three reasons are more practical than philosophical, this reason is fundamental, because it is precisely because we consider policy-making should be responsive to popular demands that the others are important.

The second reason is that, put simply, governments never have a monopoly on information germane to the decision under consideration, nor do they ever have a complete picture. They have, at best, a map of the territory they are about to cross - but, as Alfred Korzybski once put it, the map is not the territory. Information is always collected with particular purposes in mind: to continue Korzybski's analogy, a map will contain different information depending upon whether we compile it out of interest in hydrology, geology or demography; no map can represent all reality and is necessarily partial. It is important in public policy making, therefore, that we are sure that the information at hand is sufficient for prudential decision making. Information here can encompass two senses - information which is factual, and that which is evaluative (that which is primarily about public preferences).

With regard to factual information, an agency can extend its 'eyes and ears' - its intelligence gathering capabilities - by asking the public to make an input. When an agency is (as is essentially inevitable) geographically centralised and yet seeking to make good decisions concerning remote water bodies, each with problems and features having local nuances, then the advantages of consulting those who have localised knowledge is readily apparent. This reason is important in the case of water planning, but it exists to a greater or lesser extent in most policy decisions. Successful public policy making requires good, sound information because it is essentially a process involving the making and refining of statements which have hypothetical status (if we perform actions A, outcome B will occur). The more public policy making moves away from areas served by the 'harder' domains of knowledge (engineering or economics, for example) the more reliance must be placed upon the involvement of the public

who are familiar with the local conditions (local ecology, for example) which require qualitative rather than quantitative evaluation.

One particular difficulty with involving the public in a solely fact-gathering exercise concerns the difficulty in separating facts from values. Scholars such as Charles Lindblom are fundamentally correct in arguing that values usually only become known in policy making in relation to particular threats or opportunities; what is equally true is that 'facts' are often tainted by this association, and many disputes involving conflicts between opposing values (development versus the environment, for instance) degenerate into debates over 'the facts'. There is usually enough uncertainty in any set of facts in a public policy debate for the skilled opponent to get considerable political mileage from impugning them. For example, given that many assumptions inevitably must be made in a benefit-cost analysis (not to mention the omissions and limitations inherent in the methodology itself), any skilled environmental activist can undermine substantially the credibility of most benefit-cost analyses - even before they get to arguing over the environmental demerits of the project. Thus the threats and opportunities involved will inevitably color the debate in any public participation exercise because, given many rival issues competing for their attention, most individuals will likely only be interested in participating in such an exercise if they perceive a definite threat to their interests or an opportunity to further those interests.

For this reason, it can be difficult to interest the public in a participation exercise in advance of a particular proposal, and this can defeat the purpose of trying to consult the public before the agency is too much committed to one particular option. If, on the other hand, concrete examples of threats or opportunities *are* readily apparent, participation by the public on a wide scale will be easier to obtain, but the information offered by those participating is more likely to be coloured by their partisan positions. And if it appears that the agency has already taken a decision, the participation of the public is likely to be highly politicized as the actors will be seeking to help or hinder the final approval and implementation of the decision.

Despite these difficulties, it is often essential that some sort of participation exercise is engaged in, precisely because it is difficult to obtain reliable information about public preferences *without* involving the public. Voters at elections choose only between broad policy positions rather than between clearly delineated policy options, and while politicians are sometimes elected with clear mandates to take particular courses of action, many public problems do not assume the proportions of election issues or arise only between elections; accountability is important, however, and such issues must nevertheless be dealt with, and for both the politician interested in re-election and those interested in ensuring responsive policy-making, the preferences of the public count.

Reliance cannot always be placed upon the system of interest group politics to make up for the deficiencies of the electoral system as a transmitter of preferences. As scholars such as Mancur Olson and Anthony Downs have shown, particular kinds of interests (particularly those in collective goods such as consumer interests and environmental benefits) tend to be inadequately portrayed in both the group and electoral systems of representation. Because similar problems result in the failure of the market system to assign a price to such goods, the use of cost-benefit techniques as an aid to decision-making makes it all the more important that some indication of the public's valuation of environmental or social factors is sought. While a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis would ideally include *all* costs and benefits, it is the difficulty (despite techniques such as measuring travel costs or revealed preferences in related markets) of putting dollar values on factors of social or environmental concern which lies behind

One fundamental question to which cost-benefit analysis cannot **even in theory** provide the answer is the question of relative distributive justice. Cost-benefit analysis deals only with questions of economic efficiency, and rests on the fundamental assumption that the existing distribution of wealth in society is optimal. Thus, it can never offer useful advice concerning the merits of a program which might have no effect upon efficiency, but a profound effect upon the distribution of wealth. It is precisely such questions which tend to dominate political life. Distributional questions should not be seen as illegitimate intrusions into the functioning of the market system, but as perfectly legitimate political concerns.

Few government programs will ever have **zero** implications for economic efficiency, and few will be totally devoid of distributive considerations. The very difficult aim of government activity must be to balance both equity and efficiency, and it is this feature which makes public sector 'management' fundamentally different (and, in many ways, more difficult) than that in the private sector. For example, many regard water as a 'merit good', one which all people should have access to as it is essential for life, and therefore argue that it is not to be allocated solely according to the dictates of the market model. It is in order that this balance be struck as accurately as possible that public participation - with its attendant problems - is worth engaging in, especially with programs of considerable magnitude and a high degree of permanency.

The final reason for engaging in an exercise of public participation is related to the goals of the government agency concerned. All agencies need a clientele if they are to succeed in their activities, and this is especially important with agencies which are either still establishing themselves or are changing direction or undergoing reform. Programs involving public participation can be useful in establishing a clientele which will support the initiatives the agency is making. To this it must be added, however, that the opening up of decision-making processes might also result in the agency attracting 'hostile fire'. If the issue is contentious, however, that is likely to result sooner or later; it is just that public participation is likely to allow a possible clientele to be identified and cultivated. While the activities of individual agencies supported by a strong clientele are not always desirable, this is an aspect of organisational effectiveness (and thus of public policy) which can never be completely ignored. After all, one test of a good public policy is that it must be able to be adopted and implemented, and, to achieve this, agencies often need all the help they can get.

To this it must be added that public participation does have its disadvantages. There are a number of costs, including money, time and the risk of increased conflict. While participation can improve the quality of policy-making, it is just as likely to make policy-making more rather than less difficult, and it should not therefore be engaged in lightly. Participation should only occur when it is likely to yield benefits greater than its costs. Nevertheless, if carefully organised and structured, a public participation exercise can be extremely beneficial, especially in an area such as water resources where non-market costs and benefits are involved.

This brings us to survey briefly the means by which public participation might be conducted. The most commonly used method is to hold a public meeting and open the floor to input from the public. The difficulty with this approach is that, in its simplest form, such a meeting has little by way of a structured agenda (and the organizers do not want to be seen to be imposing theirs in a heavy-handed fashion) and it is inherently difficult to discuss issues in any meaningful fashion. The problem is exacerbated precisely because the meeting is public, because many participants will be compelled to make statements which stake out territory or state the position of organizations they represent, rather than engage in a discussion of the issues which will be beneficial to the policy maker. Meetings also tend to attract the civic-minded middle class rather than be fully representative of society.

The most common alternative to the public meeting is the use of survey research techniques. These allow a more accurately representative sample of the population to be consulted than do public meetings (which are often poorly attended and can be dominated by unrepresentative groups or individuals), but they are not without their disadvantages. Survey research is relatively costly, and the general public tends not to have clearly developed opinions on the matters under consideration; consequently, their responses might not be well thought out and might not represent the true feelings at all.

The traditional objection to public meetings that issues are fuzzy can be avoided by the prior circulation of background papers and by the use of small discussion groups which allow careful, detailed discussion. The problem relating to participants simply playing an advocacy role can be minimized by making the meetings somewhat less open and by engaging in consultation at an early stage in the planning process, so that participants are reacting not to proposals already decided upon, but to options at an earlier stage of the decision process.

It is therefore considered that meetings or conferences are more appropriate for the present purposes than survey techniques which, despite the availability of some sophisticated techniques for estimating public valuations of environmental goods and trade-offs between goods, are not suited to the detail and complexity involved in the development of a water strategy.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION FOR SOUTH CAROLINA

There are four needs - three of them related - which should be met in order to enjoy a successful public participation exercise in water planning in South Carolina:

1. It is essential that participants are made aware of the resource constraints which confront the planners. Participation should be by individuals who are well informed of the resource supply/demand equation confronting the policy maker; like many rights, the right to participate carries with it responsibilities - in this case, the responsibility to be informed. In a more practical sense, and viewed from the point of the policy maker, a higher level of awareness on behalf of participants will make the participation exercise more fruitful, since there will be less argument about abstract values and the debate can be focused more profitably upon the key issues. By requiring that participants digest the information vital to making the appropriate decisions, the participants will be locked into the decisional calculus which confronts the policy maker and there is the possibility that extreme views will be moderated in the light of conflicts with others - at the very least, the conflicts which need to be resolved can be identified. Any public meetings can then focus on the options which exist within the resource constraints rather than be taken up with conveying and justifying this basic information.
2. Related to this first point, there is a need for the political process in general which surrounds the water planning exercise to remedy some of the problems which give rise to the need for government intervention - questions of public goods and externalities, in particular. The process of involving the public in decision making can be particularly useful for addressing the externality problems which occur through unclear property rights because those benefiting from and those suffering from the external diseconomy can be brought together and trade-offs made. A public participation exercise in water planning needs to facilitate this process, and to facilitate the making of trade-offs rather than simply make the conflicts apparent.

3. Both these point to the need to create a 'political community' wherein participants are well-informed and confronted with the consequences of not just their actions, but those of other 'citizens' as well: not so much a community of interests but a community of conflicts of interests. It is unlikely that such a community would be able to resolve its own differences without recourse to government authority, but that authority will be more precisely wielded (and possibly less often needed) if the members of the community are well-informed and exposed to the needs of others.
4. Given that the recommendation of the Final Report is for an emphasis on *process* planning rather than *output* planning, there is also an obvious need to ensure citizen input on a continuous basis rather than simply at the outset of the planning process.

The fourth need identified here can be met quite simply by the establishment of on-going advisory committees which can serve to connect the Water Resources Commission with the community. These committees need not be representational in a strictly proportional sense (the sense of microcosmic representation), but should include representatives for each of the main interests. These committees can then serve as channels of communication between the Commission and the public in future, and might be asked to organise future public meetings. What is less obvious is precisely how the first three needs can be met given some apparent conflicts between the need for rational water planning to take into account watershed boundaries and the need to take account of political, economic and social boundaries.

There is a particular difficulty with adhering solely to watershed boundaries in soliciting public participation, as they often diverge widely from political subdivisions which, while also exhibiting some irrationality, follow a rationality of their own. Just as water flows toward low ground, so too do people move in directions which give rise to catchments, often different catchments for different purposes - hospitals, schools, and so on. Unfortunately for the water planner, rivers form hindrances to communication which makes them effective social boundaries and thus ideal political boundaries; this frustrates water planners, but makes perfect sense when one considers politics.

This kind of problem is most apparent with rivers such as the Savannah, which forms the border between South Carolina and Georgia, but the conflict between the hydrological and the social also occurs in more subtle ways. For example, the Santee River has a catchment which runs the entire breadth of the state, yet for about a third of its length is little more than a narrow stem running to the sea. Aside from the merits of involving residents adjoining the coastal stem together with those from the upstate, there are practical considerations; because of the size of the populations involved, any meetings on the Santee watershed would be best held in the upstate, but this places extraordinary demands on those from the coast who would have to travel long distances to attend, and this would inevitably limit participation by these citizens and frustrate the purpose in engaging in a public participation exercise in the first place. Moreover, in the case of the Santee, the Santee-Cooper diversion and redirection joins the two rivers into one hydrological system, occupied by a vast proportion of the State's population; this connection is recognized by the assignment of the same sub-regional hydrological unit codes to each. It would make little sense to attempt public participation on a scale which included most of the population and much of the land area in the state.

In addition, the Savannah River has its headwaters in North Carolina and forms the border between Georgia and South Carolina, and any catchment-based public participation exercise should involve the citizens of those two states - just as the management of the river basin will need to involve the governments of each state. Some compromise between political and hydrological boundaries is thus desirable when deciding on a division of the state for the purposes of eliciting citizen input.

Bearing all this in mind, and remembering that we must live in an imperfect world, what follows is a suggested geographical basis for citizen involvement in water planning in South Carolina which would make reasonable political and hydrological sense.

For the purposes of organizing a plan of citizen participation, the State should be broken down into four major regions as follows:

1. That part of the Savannah River drainage basin which lies within South Carolina (Hydrological Units 03060101, 03060102, 03060103, 03060106, 03060107, 03060109). This region can form the basis for any future citizen involvement on the Savannah as a whole.
2. The area north of the Santee River basin north to the border with North Carolina (Hydrological Units within the State having the prefix 030402-).
3. The area drained by the Broad, Combahee, Edisto, Ashley and Cooper rivers (Hydrological Units having the prefix 030502-), together with the lower stem of the Santee River (Hydrological Units 03050111 and 03050112).
4. The remainder of the Santee River drainage basin.

This configuration would have the advantage of limiting the distances which would otherwise be involved for participants in trying to proceed along strictly hydrological lines. Although the Savannah region would still run the breadth of the State, the relative lack of population on the South Carolina side in the lower Savannah basin would obviate the need for any further division for effective public participation.

One obvious disadvantage with this configuration is that a large proportion of the State's population is concentrated in the upper Santee drainage basin, and this could create problems in securing meaningful citizen input. The upper Santee basin could thus usefully be further divided into four: the Saluda River basin (Hydrological Unit 03050109); the Broad River basin (Hydrological Units 03050105, 03050106 and 03050107); the Catawba River basin (Hydrological Units 03050103 and 03050104); and the Congaree (Hydrological Unit 03050110). These boundaries would provide the basis for citizen input in politically meaningful regions centered (respectively) on the cities of Greenville, Spartanburg, Rock Hill, and Columbia, together with regions centred on Anderson (Savannah), Charleston (Edisto, Ashley, Cooper, Lower Santee, etc.) and Florence or Sumter (Pee Dee).

Participation in the South Carolina water plan can therefore be organized on the basis of these boundaries, consisting as they do of a compromise between hydrological and political boundaries. Participation should proceed on the basis of well-informed participants, who have had to confront the 'facts' faced by the planners. While presentations at a series of public meetings by the authors of the planning documents would be useful, this should not be relied

upon as the sole means of conveying information; people will accept conclusions better if they are allowed to reach them themselves, and there is always the chance they will react adversely to what they perceive as a number of 'snake oil merchants' attempting to dazzle them with a presentation which would necessarily involve more rhetoric and less fine print.

It would be preferable, therefore, if the Report were made available upon demand to the interested public, together with copies which would be provided to relevant state and county agencies and officeholders. This would, of course, involve considerable cost, although the economies of scale with printing should mean the additional cost would be small - and there is no reason why a small charge could not be made to defray expenses. At the very least, a summary should be made available, with the full report available for consultation at county offices. Copies could be provided approximately one week before public meetings in order to give the participants a chance to digest the material; this would involve some form of advertising to bring the planning exercise to the attention of the public, with the documentation and an invitation to attend a meeting issued to all those who respond.

This would not mean that the meetings would be any less open than if the time and place was simply advertised, but it would make it clear to those who might wish to participate that they have an obligation to prepare themselves for the participation process and (concurrently) that the exercise was a genuine venture in public participation, which sought effective, informed participation, rather than being a tokenistic exercise.

This initial delivery of information could then be followed up by a public meeting at each of the cities identified above, at which brief presentations would be made on the main issues to be decided. Those attending the meeting could then be given the opportunity to express their views, particularly on whether there were any issues they saw which were not covered by the Report; not much would be expected here, but it would be important to ensure that the process was seen as open to input rather than as having a closed agenda.

The next stage would then be to get the participants to give their opinions on the major options identified in the Report. Depending upon numbers attending, it might be desirable to break the meeting up into workshop sessions for this stage. While the aim should be to receive information about public preferences on a number of issues, rather than to achieve a consensus, the possibility of achieving a consensus should not be passed up. Thus, if workshop groups were to be employed, care should be taken to ensure that the membership of these groups is mixed, so that one particular view - be it an industry view or a recreational view - does not pervade each workshop; the opportunity should exist to make some trade-offs or find some common ground, even if a healthy scepticism should be retained about the likelihood of this happening. The process might be further enhanced by the technique of using questionnaires to elicit initial responses, and then using those responses to establish priorities for the meetings. This might have the additional advantage of minimizing the amount of time at the meeting which would have to be spent in open debate.

This process resembles an innovative approach known as Delbecq's Nominal Group Technique, and it is worth considering this technique and another, the Delphi technique, as means of structuring public input in order to derive maximum benefit from the participation exercise. The Nominal Group technique involves individuals working in small groups listing, aggregating, organising and even prioritising problems or important values. Free from possible intimidation from professionals or other citizens (the dominant personalities who can impose themselves on larger groups), the quantity, quality and variety of information produced are

apparently enhanced using this approach. The use of sub-regional advisory boards or committees could be one effective way of structuring public input as the planning process progresses, but given the importance of overcoming a likely middle class bias when it comes to considering the social (and particularly distributive) impact of various options, the Nominal Group technique might be worth employing, as, while advisory boards are likely to be useful in developing technical skills among participants, they make considerable time demands and are likely to favour those of higher socio-economic status.

Another method, the Delphi Technique, has been found especially useful for setting long term goals. This involves the use of a questionnaire to ascertain the views of group representatives; the responses are tabulated and returned to the respondents after comments have been noted; discussion then follows, together with further rounds of criticism and justification until a consensus is reached. Responses are anonymous, and while there is still some risk of 'groupthink', the method has the advantage of being able to produce a consensus (at least potentially) from a process from which participants will emerge considering they have had their say. A straightforward public meeting is unlikely to achieve that result. This method, or the Nominal Group Technique, both appear to hold considerable promise for public participation in the water planning process.

This process would be assisted by the use of sub-regional advisory groups which could not only act as continuing points of contact with the Water Resources Commission, but could also assist with the conduct of future participation workshops. This would help participants see the participation exercise as 'theirs', rather than the Commission's, and would reduce any suspicion that it was merely a tokenistic exercise.

On a final note, the utmost care should be given to the mechanics of the participation exercise. A good moderator is necessary to draw out the different points of view and to facilitate discussion, and it is probably desirable that this person is not identified strongly with the Water Resources Commission or with the Report. A good venue is also important, and not all buildings have facilities which are designed for interaction between a group of people - many, instead, have a design which deliberately allows those on the platform to impose themselves on the audience, and this is not what is wanted for effective public participation. Finally, the time and date of the meetings is important: there is no point in trying to involve the public if meetings are scheduled on dates or at times which make it difficult or impossible for some individuals to attend (farmers at harvest, for example). Despite the best of intentions and extreme sensitivity, some clashes are inevitable. But the whole point of involving citizens is to respond to their needs; it does not get the process off to a very good start to exclude some of them by being unresponsive.

Endnotes

¹Sherry R. Arnstein, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation", *American Institute of Planners Journal* 35 1969:216-224.

²Charles E. Lindblom, 'The "Science" of Muddling Through', *Public Administration Review*

³See Behn, 1981

⁴ See Norman Wengert, "Participation and the Administrative Process" and Helen Ingram, "The Politics of Information: Constraints on New Sources", both in Harvey R. Doerksen and John C. Pierce (eds.), *Water Politics and Public Involvement*, Ann Arbor, Ann Arbor Science, 1976.

⁵ See Mary Grisez Kweit and Robert W. Kweit, "The Politics of Policy Analysis: the Role of Citizen Participation in Analytic Decisionmaking" *Policy Studies Review* 3 1984: 234-245; p241.

⁶ See Aynsley J. Kellow, "Politics, Economics and Non-market Items", *Australian Forestry* 47 1984: 148-153.

⁷ See Kweit and Kweit, *loc. cit.*

⁸ See Kweit and Kweit *op. cit.*, p242.

⁹ Details of these techniques are given in A. Delbecq, and A. H. Van de Ven, "A Group Process Model For Problem Identification and Program Planning" and H. J. Strauss and L. H. Zeigler, "The Delphi Technique and its Uses in Social Science Research", both in R. D. Bingham and M. E. Ethridge (Eds.) *Reaching Decisions in Public Policy and Administration*, New York, Longman, 1982.

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