
Volume 8

Issue 1 *Community Development and Other
Community Applications*

Article 12

January 1990

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Recommended Citation

Timmons, Jack D. and McCall, Jack D. (1990) "Hamilton, Missouri: A Community Development Process Case Study," *Sociological Practice*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 12.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/socprac/vol8/iss1/12>

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Hamilton, Missouri: A Community Development Process Case Study

Jack D. Timmons
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ABSTRACT

A Classical community development process approach was applied in a northwestern Missouri community. The article provides a case study of how the community revitalized itself to meet citizen needs. The development stages—policy formulation, recognition, intelligence, commitment and accomplishments—are discussed.

Community development, as exemplified in Hamilton, Missouri, is a self-help, democratic process. Leadership training and development, involvement of persons representing a broad spectrum of background, capabilities and interests, and promotion of an informed public are integral components of this process (Littrell, 1980:64-71).

Local community development efforts are often carried on with the assistance of area extension community development specialists who live in the area they serve. The specialists are active facilitators whose work with citizens extends beyond the scope of economic issues. They respond to citizens' needs with their own expertise and the resources they can bring from the land grant university and other institutions. Their contacts with citizens in several communities are frequent and often entail intense involvement over an extended period. These area specialists are given technical support by state specialists in community development and other specializations.

This case study portrays a continuous process of investigation, planning, and action—a process at work in many rural communities throughout the United States.

Local citizens are working to improve their abilities to make decisions, work with others, and to make the best use of available resources.

The study was first developed around a policy formulation process described by Lovan (1986) for use by a rural revitalization effort sponsored by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. The policy model in its simplest form presents three basic stages of development: (1) recognition, (2) intelligence, and (3) commitment. The following narrative report of the process in Hamilton attempts to show those three stages and then adds an accomplishment stage.

The Situation

Hamilton, Missouri, in Caldwell County, was slowly deteriorating as a community. A combination of a depressed agriculture, a changing production economy, a shift of retail business to other larger centers, and the gradual migration of young people to other areas had eroded both local employment and retail sales. Many buildings in downtown Hamilton were empty and many of those still occupied were showing signs of age, lacking adequate maintenance. The railroad that had been part of the first line across Missouri was closing down. Pride was low in this small rural community of 1,600 people.

By 1983 Hamilton appeared to have lost its spark. Many of the changes that had taken place had crept up on the people of the town. The spark that kindles pride in community and hope for the future was nearly extinguished when the railroad announced it would abandon the line through town. The railroad's decision startled Hamilton's residents into open recognition that their town was dying.

There had been sporadic revitalization efforts prior to 1983. An industrial development corporation (a branch of the Chamber of Commerce) had existed for several years, but competition for the small number of new industrial plants was stiff. The corporation's sole success had been attracting a bowling alley to improve recreation services. Some members hoped there might be additional ways to improve Hamilton and its economy other than through "smokestack chasing."

The University of Missouri extension community development specialist serving north central Missouri had responded in the past when different community groups had sought help or information related to specific community problems. The community development specialist also had suggested exploring a variety of development opportunities.

Other university-sponsored activities had occurred over several years that helped develop the awareness of community potentials which eventually resulted in an active development program. A 1976 presentation was made by a state specialist in community development that identified the architectural potential of nineteenth century downtown commercial buildings and suggested

ways to renovate them that would improve the appearance and preserve cultural heritage.

In 1980 a rural youth leadership development workshop was conducted by university faculty in which adults who assisted learned about developing human and natural resources. In 1981 an extension rural sociologist made a presentation concerning trends that affect community growth and decline.

Recognition of the Situation

The response to these presentations and other activities prior to 1983 was positive, but ideas often take a while to germinate. The closing of the railroad was the catalyst that prompted action in Hamilton.

Motivated local leaders requested help from the extension community development specialist. The specialist told them of the university's model for conducting economic base studies and suggested they begin their exploration by using this model to analyze Hamilton's economy.

The economic base study revealed some surprises. It was found that income from agricultural production for Caldwell County was a relatively small and declining percentage of total income, and that bad years in agriculture only marginally affected the local economy, although there were serious social impacts. Transfer payments to senior citizens proved to be the largest single source of local income.

Several local retailers acted immediately. They modified marketing strategies and merchandise lines to target more of their goods and services toward senior citizens. Businesses reported sales were good on the new items.

Several meetings were held to discuss a variety of strategies to improve economic activity. No single strategy emerged as a panacea to all the problems, but collectively they showed greater potential than concentrating only on industrial recruitment.

Community members filled out a one page "Rate Your Community" scale at a public meeting. The results highlighted Hamilton's shortcomings as perceived by this group of citizens. The community leaders were pleasantly surprised to find that over 75 percent of those responding indicated they were willing to help bring about change if someone would assume leadership in proposing projects.

The Intelligence Gathering Phase

Encouraged, the study group decided to conduct an in-depth survey of community attitudes toward Hamilton's public and private services. The Junior Chamber of Commerce led in developing and distributing the survey in early 1984. The results were analyzed by the community development specialist and a state

extension specialist in the Office of Socio-Economic Data Analysis. Opportunities for specific action emerged.

The survey revealed that people were generally positive about local businesses and thought the sales people were pleasant and courteous (83 percent). Respondents indicated a need for restroom facilities downtown (72 percent) and felt that improving the appearance of downtown would attract more business (69 percent).

Community members expressed a strong need for recreation and entertainment for young adults (55 percent) and nearly all (87 percent) said that Hamilton needed more employment opportunities. More than 70 percent felt efforts to gain new industry were inadequate.

Citizens also identified enterprises missing from Hamilton's business district. As one outcome, a local individual has equipped and now operates a laundromat. In addition, grocery stores have extended their hours to accommodate people who work out of town.

There were a number of assets in the community that people thought could be bases for growth. It was proposed that the nearby J.C. Penney birthplace be purchased and moved into town near the existing J.C. Penney museum to encourage tourism.

Several people recalled the downtown architecture presentation that occurred in 1976. A local young man majoring in architecture accepted the challenge to develop drawings of feasible changes in the commercial buildings. He and his classmates also completed and presented a downtown park and landscaping plan in 1985.

During 1984 and 1985, several public meetings were sponsored by the development group and by local officials to hear and benefit from resource people with experience in problem solving on issues affecting Hamilton. Acting as a broker, the community development specialist made important contributions by identifying and obtaining the services of these resource specialists.

Citizens discussed problems and possibilities with experts from the university, state agencies and national non-profit organizations. An awareness of purpose and a sense of self-reliance emerged in Hamilton.

Several members of the loosely knit development group attended a "Main Street" conference in St. Joseph, Missouri, in April 1985. "Main Street" is a national program that provides a strategy and technical assistance to rebuild the commercial sector in communities with a population of less than 40,000. The Hamilton participants came home from the conference with renewed enthusiasm.

By mid-1988 there were over twenty task forces, short- and long-term, studying different issues and developing plans. Their concerns included quality of life community issues as well as the exploration of economic potential. For example, one task force began exploring the establishment of a business incubator. Another began to look at ways to help people who had lost their farms.

The Commitment Phase

The combination of the community development process advocated and practiced by the area extension community development specialist and the "Main Street" strategy proved to be the springboard that launched the community into concerted efforts to develop its own program. The development group formally organized itself as "Hamilton Second Century" and initially formed six task forces: (1) Merchant Support; (2) Tourism; (3) Landscaping; (4) Promotion; (5) Rural Crisis; and (6) Organization. Goals were selected, data bases for each task force were established, plans were developed and activities initiated.

"Hamilton Second Century" has assumed an informal governing role. It is an organization outside the existing formal government structure and, as such, provides leadership for the development process with an inherent flexibility that is difficult to achieve through the formal system. The organization is in a position to experiment, undertake tasks that the city government is not legally empowered to address, and take risks that government cannot. For example, the development organization has purchased land for special development, helped businesses get started with a small venture capital fund, and sponsored special workshops and meetings that would have been politically risky.

"Hamilton Second Century" coordinates idea generation, discussion and planning. Other organizations (which function independently) often assume the responsibility for implementation. The high level of commitment among Hamilton's citizenry is underscored by the broad spectrum of individuals and organizations that have accepted the coordination role of "Hamilton Second Century". These include, for instance, retail business people, bankers, a publisher, a locker plant operator, farmers, service providers, manufacturers, housewives, a garden club, the Chamber of Commerce, the Junior Chamber of Commerce, schools, a nursing home, and developers.

Throughout the citizens' efforts, excellent coverage by the local newspaper and radio station has informed the general public of their activities, shared intelligence, and provided well-deserved recognition. Dissemination of information through reports to various organizations and by word of mouth was also very effective.

The Results

The six original task forces are proud of their efforts. They have been joined by others to make a body of more than twenty task forces working on various ideas and opportunities.

Successes include:

- Thirty new businesses have opened in four years, ranging from a laundromat to a mall remodeling firm. Although a few businesses have closed, they all have been purchased and reopened by someone else.
- Design packages prepared for business people who wish to renovate buildings. (Three have been used so far.)
- Financial assistance provided for a new light industrial plant. (Six new jobs have been created.)
- Expansion of a private nursing home (40 new jobs) “because the attitude in Hamilton is positive.”
- The J.C. Penney home has been acquired. (It was moved to a downtown park and renovated.)
- Approval of railroad land purchase for a downtown park and tourist center. (Some land already has been purchased.)
- Organization of a bus tour by a regional tourism organization.
- Purchase and operation of a rail line by a regional consortium.
- A reactivated garden club which is taking responsibility for downtown plantings, including trees.
- North Missouri steam and gas engine show adopted as a major promotion.
- Logo designed for T-shirts and caps sold to raise funds.
- Several fund-raising events sponsored (including softball tournaments and dances).
- Sponsorship of a seminar on effects of bankruptcies and farm foreclosures.
- Opportunity Day instituted to provide a positive focus on career change and training opportunities available to farmers.
- Receipt of a demonstration grant to establish an emergency assistance center to aid rural families. (The center is staffed and functioning).
- Creation of an independent board of directors to work with the city of Hamilton.
- VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America—often called the “domestic Peace Corps”) proposal accepted and funded twice.

- A second VISTA worker recruited to assist with the local VISTA project. (This was undertaken at the suggestion of the regional VISTA office.)
- Fifth place award for community efforts the first year Hamilton entered the Missouri Community Betterment Program, a statewide competition. Subsequently, the community received the third place award.
- Established J.C. Penney Days to annually recognize local efforts and bring in speakers who have special skills in development.

Members of the community have been involved with a number of regional and state conferences during the last three years. They have presented the Hamilton story and, in return, have learned from other communities who are working to cope with the changing world economy.

The Community Development Process in Hamilton

The citizens of Hamilton engaged in deliberate discussion to identify, explore and take action on issues affecting their community. They learned how to create a community environment compatible with the larger world and still meet their local needs and wants.

The period prior to 1983 was a slowly developing recognition phase for the community of Hamilton. Local leaders tried to improve the economic and social environment through several projects, but community energy had not been activated.

Several educational programs had been conducted, but still were being digested. The elements were present for the beginning of a concerted development process, but the spark had not yet ignited the fires.

The loss of the railroad and the deepening agricultural economic crisis stimulated local leadership to a commitment for constructive action. This does not mean that community development can only be done in a crisis; it appears, however, that the process is more condensed and intense when there is a strong element of immediacy.

The recognition that something needed to be done to prevent Hamilton from continuing to decline in business, population, and vitality prompted leaders to study the community and find out how it operates. The economic base study, the survey, and the public meetings provided the intelligence for doing this.

Concern and commitment to action were evidenced by the regular attendance at meetings and participation in the study. Local leadership contributed to the success of all stages of the development process.

As people learned about their own community and listened to the ideas of outside resource people, they began to develop strategies to deal with their situation. The more involved they became, the more their commitment grew.

The formation of a new, independent organization—"Hamilton Second Century"—promoted participation of people who were not involved in the formal government of Hamilton and further increased commitment within the community. Each of the task forces developed new leadership, expanded the base of participation, and implemented projects important to the overall effort. When "Hamilton Second Century" was organized, it was with the knowledge that the members were embarking on a comprehensive community development program.

City government was not in the forefront of the development effort, but provided assistance upon request. The city's commitment to the program has included legal support, equipment for various activities, office and clerical support, and encouragement.

The Hamilton experience is an example of the community development approach to local policy decisions and program implementation. The community, with the help of the area extension community development specialist, looked at itself, drew on outside information, defined gaps between what it was becoming and what it hoped to become, began exploring ways to move toward its preferred future, and initiated action to bring about that future.

This is essentially a refinement of the situation described by de Tocqueville a century and a half ago. Raise a problem with people in an American community and they will call a meeting to discuss it, propose solutions, select a course of action, and carry it out.

Today, Hamilton is a proud community on the way back to economic and social viability. As of August 1989, every business front on Main Street was occupied except the hotel (which has been purchased and donated to the city) and a recently closed beauty shop that is for sale. Plans are being formulated to obtain a historical site designation for the hotel which will then guide its future use. Most communities would consider themselves well-off if forty-four of their forty-five Main Street business fronts were occupied.

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