

## **EXTENSION PROGRAMMING ON POLICY FOR ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

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The goals of environmental protection and economic development seem always to be at odds. They need not be. We know that a safe attractive environment has economic value and that the economic future of a place can be permanently shifted by polluted water or landscape.

But those most intensely committed to growth or protection seem inexorably drawn to battle and the subtlety of reality is displaced by the rhetorical shorthand of conflict.

This is true not only where there is development pressure, but also in areas seeking orderly decline. The reason, of course, is money. There are fortunes to be made. Those in the business of development stand to gain or lose a lot while those who, by assignment or personal commitment, try to protect the environment feel no immediate financial impact.

The distribution of the consequences of economic change define the combatants, the battlefield and the time of battle. While the purposes of environmental protection and economic change would most certainly converge with time, the participants are impatient, not inclined to compromise.

### **The Rhetoric**

The rhetoric of any policy issue is confusing. Sorting out what is really being said is part of the educator's challenge. That is particularly the case in development/protection debates. There is much high-blown discussion about the sanctity of private property, the foundation of the free enterprise system and "the American way."

Idaho's Senator Symms has admonished all of us that ". . . private property is every bit as essential to a healthy democratic society as are any other basic civil rights guaranteed by our Bill of Rights" (p. 244). He and Senator Boren from Oklahoma have introduced legisla-

tion requiring federal agencies to consider the impact of their regulations on private property. A property rights impact statement will likely be required for every “substantial” change in regulations. This sounds like full-employment policy for writers of impact statements—environmental, decision and now property rights.

Of course, agencies must respect constitutional protection for private property anyway. Declaring it one more time will not change anything. More rhetoric, more paper.

Arguments to protect property rights are, as we all know, symbols of the real argument, to protect the opportunity to transfer those rights at a handsome profit. The participant in farmland protection debates least interested in protection is the farmer, in whose name it all happens. Farmers will fight to protect the opportunity to complain about their nonfarm neighbors who object to the noise and smell of farming and compete for scarce, clean water.

There are other rhetorical symbols as well. The spotted owl is not just a bird, it represents untrammled old growth timber and quiet open space. Habitat protection is a claim for rights by those preferring wilderness to shopping centers. A wetland is not just a swamp, it is also the absence of unappealing development.

Understanding the rhetoric of the issue is one thing; coping with it in an educational program is a far greater challenge. The policy educator must juggle symbols very carefully to keep the interaction positive and productive. Some who employ the rhetoric really believe they are fighting about owls and “the American way.” Insulting them is poor strategy.

### **Elements of a Policy Education Program**

The basic tenet of policy education on any topic is that informed public choice is somehow “better” and more resilient than uninformed choice. That may not be true, but we could hardly believe otherwise.

Timing is fundamental—the data and insights must get to the decision maker while there is still something to decide. It is far more effective to help facilitate a reasoned land use and economic development plan than it is to patch up mistakes later.

Content is inevitably a series of “yes-but” statements for which we economists are famous. It would be so much easier to fabricate simplicity and stick to it the way other scientists do (and some economists, for that matter).

### **Purpose**

Our goal is to facilitate orderly change, minimize conflict and generally inform people. It is not our goal to preserve farmland, pre-

serve farmers, preserve wetlands, increase the supply of cheap housing or expand the tax base. We may vote on those issues at some point, but continued credibility as analysts and educators requires that we merely catalyze a decision process.

## **Audience**

County extension staff are often the ones most vulnerable to development/protection debates. They must survive in the community somehow and policy education can help. Key policy participants are also part of the audience, of course—groups that will mobilize to encourage or delay physical change. The most effective approach is to involve interested parties in organization and delivery of content. A Chamber of Commerce president or environmental leader can take ownership for the educational event if given a role. He or she gets some visibility and is more likely to compromise later if given the chance to articulate the trade-offs involved. One cannot be sure, of course. Some spokespeople will simply “grandstand” and not compromise a bit.

## **Understanding the Policy Process**

An effective policy education effort must have conceptual content. While it must be served in small, palatable doses, such content is what separates educators from the “how-to-do-it” types. This is particularly important for extension field staff who may feel themselves slipping into a swamp of specific facts and figures and need a sense of the bigger picture.

Policy is really not Brownian Motion, jerking here and there in random fashion. There is predictability to the chaos, consistent patterns to be described. It can be comforting to be part of a describable process.

On the other hand, those in formal policy positions may resent being lectured to on these matters. I have heard bureaucrats grumble about extension dabbling in policy. Policy is *their* business after all, defining what must be done. The educator must handle these different perceptions carefully, but firmly.

## **Concepts of Property Rights**

This simply must be a part of policy education in this delicate area of development/protection. A few basic principles of law must be established. Concepts of reasonableness and due process, and particularly the cultural context of law, must be discussed. The concept of fee simple ownership is poorly understood and can be addressed as an historical and abstract component of property law. There must be discussion of the concept of public interest and the public trust. Such

discussions must be clean of specific applications to any case or emerging issue in the local setting.

### **Economic Character of the Place**

A policy education effort focused on local or regional change should include the economic facts—who is doing what for whom at what price, and how has it changed over time. People are often surprised at how employment structure, demographics or trade patterns have evolved over time. Creative presentation of Census results, using lots of charts and graphs, can be a productive element of a balanced program.

### **Define At-Risk Environments**

The policy educator will obviously need some help with this one. It is a good chance to call on colleagues in forestry or biology. Participants need to know what is out there, why it is important and what impacts (beyond economics) might result from physical change. And they need to see what difference those environments might make to *them* as individuals. The community may decide that development is worth the price, but they at least need to know what that price is and that impacts may extend beyond the city, county, regional or state boundary.

### **Describe Potential Costs and Benefits of Development**

Care is needed here to acknowledge that development will likely mean greater monetary return to a unit of land or water, but also implies monetary costs for the community. Higher returns mean higher incomes for some (though not all) and more property, sales and income tax for worthy public purposes. Costs may come as traffic congestion, disrupted water flows or other impacts.

### **Policy Choices**

Finally, participants in development/protection policy discussions must know that they *do* have options. They need not be bullied by the seemingly inexorable forces of change or by the warnings of dire consequences to air and water. Change *can* be guided in a thoughtful way, with those who gain helping to compensate those who perceive loss. Impact taxes, mitigation investments and other such actions can help make economic development a positive factor for the community. And there is more to development policy than regulation of land use. Outside experience with various growth management instruments should be a part of the policy education process.

## Post Script

All of the above assumes time for thoughtful consideration, judgment, reflection. Open warfare over a development or preservation proposal is no time for reflection. Damage control or conflict resolution are called for at that point. Knowing when it is time to grab one's life vest (or flak vest) and head for high ground is a mark of good sense, not cowardice.

We all must know what we are good at, and even more importantly, what we are simply not equipped to handle. Just as we defer to a biologist to explain the functioning of a wetland eco-system, so, too, it is time to call in the experts when political conflict has erupted.

An educator, particularly from a land grant university, has too many masters out there to permit himself or herself to be attributed to one side or another of a white-hot development issue.

### REFERENCES

Symms, Steve. "In Defense of Private Property." *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation*. 46 (July-Aug. 1991):244.