

#147 The Importance of Public Participation

Last week this column summarized the core principles of sustainability for our communities - economy, ecology, and equity - the new standard for bottom-line economic improvement. The profitability and loss in any area directly impacts the other sectors in the balance sheets of commercial, governmental and community enterprise.

An energetic, informed, sustained growth in public participation in decision-making needs to be added. For the moment we are beginning to enjoy the benefits of government by the people, the least developed leg of the marvelous trio of governance declared by the great Lincoln.

The recent county government public meetings have drawn standing room crowds. For example, public demand for participation in the user fee for solid waste issue, which demonstrated tremendous public expertise and courage, has clarified many of the issues, freed everyone from initial positions, and has developed a more transparent and shared policy decision-making process. This public discussion also raised new questions about the quality of organization, skills and priorities that determine daily functioning of government operations which will prove valuable in the near future.

Increased public participation in forming policy decisions about the county jail project promise the same benefits for officials and citizens. From the large turnout at the recent meeting with the Chairman of the NYS Corrections Commission, County officials should feel encouraged to provide more opportunity for the public to engage in more open, robust dialogue on this unavoidable, major project. Progress must be made. Better and more affordable solutions will be found through greater public participation.

There are many other issues of vital importance where public participation needs to become more focused and engaged. None has greater priority than what and how economic development initiatives are designed and promoted. The recently announced proposal for development of the Apollo Mall as a high-end outdoor recreation retail and sports venue and the Mountains of Opportunity Charette event, the Liberty Slaughterhouse and the plans to retrofit our buildings and homes with energy saving and renewable energy production will benefit from increased and highly focused public participation. I am certain there are several other economic development projects that are being planned but are not sufficiently brought into public discussion.

I have a suggestion to make this happen in a manner that benefits government effectiveness and garners government greater public support and approval, captures the expertise and very different but important view on issues, and creates momentum for problem solution and project completion.

To facilitate a more effective partnership between the public and local government I suggest that the county hire a full-time information officer who will be given the mandate and resources to offer a very substantial increase in services. The county website needs constant updating and more extensive information and promotion as a trusted and easily accessible source. This office would be available for all manner of local meetings on a pro-active scheduled basis of its own initiative as well as responsive to requests from the community. The position is currently vacant but has a line item in the current budget. The public will be willing to accept the cost of this office in these difficult economic times because they will receive the benefit and the

government will save more than the cost of this office through the better decisions it renders because of increased and more effective public participation in government policy-making

Government exists to assist the people. The people are ready and capable of assisting. Let's put the pieces together. Greening Sullivan is the responsibility of everyone. The best government is not that which governs least but which governs the most in close, sustained concert with, by and for the people.