What about the Public as Voter and Taxpayer?

John Clayton Thomas’s discussion of the role of the public as citizen, customer, and partner provides a valuable tool for public managers as they consider how and when to engage the public in their work.

Among these three roles, Thomas argues that “the public probably plays its most important role in public management when it joins with managers in … deliberation about the nature of public programs.” In other words, the role of the public as citizen engaged in the program and policy decision-making process is preeminent. Thomas also notes, however, that the “new school of thought on the work of governing” focuses on the role of the public as partner or coproducer of government services.

The public’s most important and growing roles as both citizen and partner manifest in a variety of forms in local governments in the United States.

Participatory budgeting—in which the public is directly involved in local budget decisions—is one of the more recent and most interesting trends in the role of the public as citizen. In the United States, participatory budgeting started in one Chicago ward in 2009. In the 49th Ward, Alderman Joe Moore set aside $1.3 million in capital allocations and opened the process for both developing project ideas and selecting project ideas to his 60,000 constituents. He then held eight neighborhood assemblies at which attending residents were charged with developing project ideas and then nominating projects for selection and setting overall priorities for capital funding. In its first year, 1,600 residents were part of the process. By 2012, residents across the ward were voting for new sidewalks, playgrounds, tree planting, and murals.¹

In San Francisco, residents in Supervisor David Chiu’s district were able to vote on how to spend $100,000 in discretionary funds. San Francisco’s participatory budgeting pilot allowed the use of funds for operating expenditures rather than just funding capital projects, as was the case in Chicago. Selected projects included a public awareness campaign to educate seniors on consumer scams, Chinese language books for North Beach and Chinatown branch libraries, and eviction prevention programs.²

In participatory budgeting, direct involvement leads to direct and meaningful results—recognizing Thomas’s principle requiring that the results of public involvement actually be used.

Direct involvement and direct results can also be an important dynamic in the role of the public as partner. There have long been, at the local level, opportunities for direct partnership, in which members of the public voluntarily deliver what otherwise would be publicly provided services.

In some ways, the historical antecedent of the neighborhood watch—in which members of the public voluntarily patrol neighborhoods to both deter and report crime to the police—is the sheriff’s posse (Huettel 2012). Nationally, more than 70 percent of fire departments registered with the federal government are volunteer run.³

But direct citizen involvement in the delivery of local government services has expanded over time. In Hamilton County, Tennessee, parents of students attending certain public magnet schools are required to contribute a minimum number of hours volunteering in classrooms or on school projects. In Detroit, neighborhood volunteers—with some philanthropic support—have taken to the streets to board up vacant structures and remove debris, knowing that the bankrupt city government lacks the resources to do so (Lawrence 2013).

Thomas leaves unquestioned the proposition that these types of involvement—done in the
Thus, it might be that Thomas’s guiding principles on the place of the public in public management would benefit from the addition of the following consideration: are there ways that we can engage the public as citizen, customer, and partner that would increase their participation in the voting process and their willingness to adequately fund the government services that they demand?

Notes

References
