

Civic Conversation in Madison Wisconsin

By Joe Sensenbrenner

How can we improve the quality of life in Madison for all citizens?

After mulling over civic improvement strategies for twenty years, refining specific methods for two years, and completing three cycles of pilot groups, some preliminary results are emerging from my long-held inquiry. Often, the place to begin is in asking the right questions:

- How can we improve our collective futures?
- How might we invite large numbers of people to join in the process?
- How might they become engaged?
- What outcomes are likely?
- What support structure will be most fruitful?

The Opening

Three experiences in my life urged me to seek answers to these fundamental questions.

The first is continuing and deepening frustration with the limitations of formal election-based public decision making processes. As a general proposition these involve casting votes over at least yearly intervals and are apparently contested (if at all) around narrow or largely irrelevant slogans masquerading as “issues”. As a participant in traditional politics over a thirty-year period as a staffer, advisor, volunteer, candidate and office holder, I believe I have an acute sense of what works well within that system: very little – almost nothing these days. A brief review of how most elected bodies spend their time (or their speeches – much less campaign communication) will reveal how little is of fundamental importance or concern. (Then, of course, there is the matter of how often the rhetoric is matched by deeds or workable proposals.) Civic discourse has become little more than adversarial shouting back and forth. Everyone shouts, no one listens.

Another source for this search for better ways is based on years of observing how people interact in many voluntary, public and business organizations: their stated values and their actual behavior are often far apart. This often results in great stress, as people’s deep beliefs are frustrated, until those very beliefs gradually atrophy or emerge as some stress-related business or domestic issue. There are very few places where one can practice deeply held values while interacting with others concerning matters of business or civic importance -- with anyone, let alone unfamiliar neighbors or respectful strangers.

The third factor urging me to try something new is not really public in origin. It emerges from wondering about what exactly could significantly change our ways of thinking and doing? An analogy is suggested by a phenomenon in the physical world. What happens in a supersaturated solution when the tiniest but perfectly suited crystalline shape is suddenly introduced: it all shifts form almost instantly into alignment and a different state

of matter. With so many formerly fixed or anchored opinions or beliefs drifting, with new perspectives and knowledge coming to our attention, with former answer-givers either in retreat or narrowing their claims, might there be some clarifying way of being and seeing that may be accessed with many people being open and contributing with authenticity?

A Proposal

The occasion of the City of Madison, Wisconsin's Sesquicentennial (150th birthday) offered an opportunity of considerable scope and promise. I sought membership and was appointed to the Sesquicentennial Commission.

First it was necessary to place the concept of my coalescing ideas into what the Commission defined as its "Values." My addition to the draft Values provided we would, in addition to other goals, foster activities that were:

Civic skill enhancing. In the process of identifying goals we need to enhance our civic skills to notice, understand, learn and share in ways that support progress. This individual and collective enhancement of skills should increase our capacity to make good decisions and engage broad-based support in reaching success.

The adoption of this language guaranteed inclusion of Civic Conversation information on the official city website and related media channels.

Similar endorsements followed by two diverse organizations, the Madison Area Quality Improvement Network, which has nearly 100 corporate members, and a 150-member personal inquiry group known as New Omega. These mailing lists and contacts formed the pilot tier of invitees in October and November of 2005.

The design tested in the Pilot Phase drew on elements of many traditions, including authors David Bohm (*On Dialogue*) and the work of Glenna Gerard and Linda Ellinor (*Dialogue: rediscovering the transforming power of conversation*) and incorporated the following main elements:

- An overview of the process in three pages sent by email with a personal invitation
- A two-page concise description of the method denominated *dialogue*¹
- Groups of between five and nine people

¹ The basic elements of the practice of *dialogue* include:

- *Suspension of judgment*
- *Listening to others and oneself*
- *Identification of assumptions*
- Reflection and Inquiry

Supporting practices include: one person speaking at a time, comments directed to the whole circle (not to any individual or specific comment), accepting silence as an integral part of group communication and speaking only when "moved".

- A trained facilitator
- Two or three-sessions of two and a half hours at one week intervals
- The same focus question for all meetings (“What would Madison look like in ten years if we were wildly successful in achieving health and wellness?”)
- A prohibition against “doing” or organizing any activity under the auspices of the Civic Conversation

This method had several advantages with attendant limitations. Probably the most discomfoting at first for new attendees was the prohibition of any project organizing or development. The purpose of this rule was simple: to free the process of inquiry from any baggage attached by those who might oppose or feel threatened by some idea that might emerge. Someone, of course, might take action, but it would not be official or under the Civic Conversation banner. Also, any fundraising or turf issues would arise beyond our organization.

The Response

People were attracted to this process for several reasons. Several health care providers or administrators came with targeted changes in parts of the traditional system, providers of complementary medicine wanted to broaden definitions of treatment and health, those on a spiritual path often stressed the mind/body/spirit connection, and community activists often advocated neighborhood and interconnecting strategies initially. Thus a pattern of experiential based advocacy was observed.

Some come greatly intrigued by the breadth they see embraced by the focus question: they are curious about what would happen, what might emerge. Some are primarily seeking a replacement for the verbal fisticuffs that pass for policy debate. Some have felt isolated from even the possibilities of cordial communication about matters of public concern.

In sum, people came from many perspectives and carried quite varied expectations about communicating a point of view (some nearly amounting to advocacy). But by the second meeting, the mood and energy seemed to shift to a more open and idea-inviting perspective. The topics began to have more deeply connected themes and lead to underlying attitudes and long-held beliefs. More than one group explored connections among obesity, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, smoking, access to power, voting and complementary medicine!

Issues

An important design issue is whether to require that each group meet for two or three meetings. At the outset all the stewards agreed that a three-meeting series would have many advantages: developing deeper interpersonal relationships, greater relaxation and confidence with the techniques, and more targeted general guidance by facilitators.

However, the difficulties of securing participants with the three sequential weekday evenings available were considerable. The first pilot groups were each of six participants and two sessions. This was viewed as a compromise to launch the project before the holidays. In January the three-session model was tried with only one group (nine participants) being assembled from perhaps twenty desiring to join. In February, with another standard of three sessions, one group of five participants could be assembled.

The current plan is to offer two sessions meeting twice and two groups to meet three times in April. For idiosyncratic reasons, March is not a fit for each of the stewards.

Another factor which has determined the pace of the growth of the Conversation is the lack of a web site with the features needed to invite and facilitate participation. The assumption all along has been that the City's official Sesquicentennial site would host the functionality needed. Although contacts were initiated in October 2005, only the second week of February 2006 brought PDF features online. It is hoped that a calendar, one-way email, and some links can be added very soon. Some searchability of proposed projects is desired but proving a challenge. Outside volunteer help is now being engaged.

The general media has also decided to delay coverage of the Conversation until the anniversary itself. This is understandable from a news point of view, but prevents our building interest before the date using public media. So while the initial aspiration was to build interest and participation in the months preceding the Sesquicentennial celebration, it now is our plan to declare that a "successful model tailored to Madison" is ready and will build on the coverage of the events surrounding the anniversary date.

We anticipate that our efforts will be covered by both local daily newspapers, an interview and editorial on the most watched public affairs local TV program (WISC—Channel 3), one weekly (*Isthmus*) and one monthly (*Madison Magazine*). Other media (*e.g.*, church bulletins) have expressed interest, also.

Reflections

This is great fun.

Reflecting on the experience and the possibilities is continuously energizing.

One key appears to be the "letting go" of detailed expectations. While it is valuable to communicate energy and commitment to a new project as others are being engaged, descriptions of possible futures such as levels of participation must be lightly held. That is so because it is likely that with such a creative undertaking, most of the variables will differ from initial thoughts and interact in ways that were not fully expected.

For example, we selected a strategy of relying on word of mouth from former participants for the January meetings. This was based on some written statements and direct nodding and comment during last meetings of the prior group. Thirty-six hours before the round was to start, with four possible commitments, I sent out an email canceling the next

round. Within four hours – and from people who had not received or been contacted by those who got the cancellation mail – three people expressed their intention to attend. I got out an “It’s ON!” email. Then, just as the group gathered, two more people showed up for a total of nine! Some trusting and flexibility is required.

Another area of learning and experimentation is the home page and technology set of issues. For a minimally-competent user of the internet (myself), the process of learning the capacities of public systems and alternative ways of fostering interaction has been slow and uneven. It is still not clear whether what is being designed will be adequate.

Reflections of Charles Pfeifer

I too am excited about this process.

In my previous incarnations first as a physicist and then as an urban minister/mystic, I realized we are trapped by our concepts. Physicists rejected Bohm's implicate order as metaphor and not physics. Activists of all political persuasions think in polarized terms that reinforce prejudgments and minimize third way alternatives. Furthermore, this type of behavior reduces our latent potential (as humans) for creativity and compassion. The dialogue process provides a way to tap Bohm's implicate order or, as the Jungians put it, for us to stand on the ego-self axis.

This then raises a concern and a hope for our process of involving a critical number of citizens in our community in The Conversation. My concern is that this way of doing things is radically different from the adversarial processes condoned by the dominant culture. This implies an institutional resistance that must be overcome. Many people see dialogue as "just talk without action." People need a hook of some sort to help them allocate time and energy for this involvement. When we conducted "round table discussions" in Madison Urban Ministry, the hook was using dialogue to engage community issues such as the death penalty or abortion where there was a lot of energy on two sides of a debate. People were willing to try this new approach as a possible option for dealing with these divisive issues. How can we get people to appreciate that one can focus on the positive potential of a community and not just on problems?

This then is where I am hopeful. I believe we can use traditional community development tools - personal conversations, recruiting involvement through established networks, establishing cohorts of people who believe in the potential of dialogue and who are willing to work on a time-line of years to develop dialogues as another way to engage in civic discussion. It is exciting to imagine a community development process that is itself predicated on practices of dialogue - deep listening, examining assumptions and prejudgments, reflection, inquiry. Such a process would involve establishing and evaluating efforts while also staying open to synchronicity. It would involve deep listening to one another as we proceed, but also deep listening to attitudes and patterns in the community which might provide synchronous channels to new ways of proceeding

that further expand our own vision of what community growth and development can become. In this sense we might be engaging Bohm's implicate order collectively and growing into our latent potential as humans in the process.

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