

Emerging Collaborative Governance Models: The Monongahela River Town Program

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“Roads and rivers, power lines and pollution; all ignore the lines arbitrarily drawn on maps centuries ago. It is our mental map of who we are that will have the most to do with who we become.”

Christopher Briem, University of Pittsburgh

Introduction

A quiet revolution has emerged over the past two decades as agencies, communities, industry, and citizens have come together across political and geographic boundaries to address economic and ecological challenges and build sustainable futures for their communities. This social trend represents a historical shift from traditional forms of hierarchical governance to a more horizontal governance approach that emphasizes the interactions between different sectors of society and a more collaborative approach to decision-making (Leong, Emmerson, and Byron, 2011). Whether described conceptually as collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008), ecological governance (Robertson & Choi, 2010), or adaptive governance (Brunner et al. 2005), these collaborative initiatives share many of these common elements of this new governance era: mutual learning; transparency; interdependence; adaptation; building trust; and flexibility.

This collaborative governance trend is particularly evident where communities and stakeholders share a significant geographic resource or corridor. A powerful example of this is along the Great Allegheny Passage (GAP), the 150 mile dedicated biking/hiking trail connecting Pittsburgh, PA and Cumberland, MD along the former Western Maryland railroad route (Pruetz, 2013). Along the GAP, fading railroad towns like Meyersdale and Rockwood are collaborating in a “Trail Town” program that helps communities get organized to capture the trail-based tourism potential of the GAP. This proceedings paper describes another collaborative governance initiative, the Monongahela River Town Program, and reports on a management roundtable facilitated to promote mutual learning among students, scientists, educators, and resource managers interested in adopting similar programs in their home or region.

NERR Conference Management Roundtable Goals and Format

The purpose of this NERR Management Roundtable was to describe one such collaborative governance initiative, The Monongahela River Town Program. Our expert panel included several program leaders of the River Town Program. Following a brief profile and background of the River Town Program, roundtable participants were encouraged to share their own regional planning experiences and reflect on keys to success and strategies to build the capacity of these collaborative governance initiatives. Special attention was given to how to expand university-community partnerships as part of these collaborative governance initiatives.

The Monongahela River Town Program

Background

The “River Towns” of the Monongahela River Valley were founded upon the power of the river to transport raw materials and people to industrial centers like Pittsburgh or the western frontier. Until the 1960s, these communities prospered, supplying Pittsburgh with raw materials to support the steel industry. The post WWII collapse of the US steel industry led to systemic job and population loss from these communities, leaving historic riverfronts and buildings vacant and shuttered (Parker, 1999).

After 50 years of economic struggle, hope and renewal is surging again through these river towns. Residents and visitors are re-discovering the Monongahela River, not only as an industrial corridor, but as a natural and cultural asset, worthy of protection and stewardship. The “River Town Program” initiative capitalizes on this growing public recognition of the Monongahela River as a strategic asset.

River Town Program Approach

The Monongahela River Town Program is a community revitalization program, founded by Cathy McCollom, of McCollom Development Strategies, with over 30 years of experience working with southwestern Pennsylvania communities. Patterned after the successful “Trail Town” Program along the Great Allegheny Passage rail-trail from Pittsburgh, PA to Cumberland, MD, the “River Town Program” is a regional and community-based economic revitalization and development initiative that promotes conservation and sustainability by capitalizing on the outdoor recreation and nature-based tourism potential of the Monongahela River.

The River Town Program, supported by the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation of Pittsburgh and the Pennsylvania Environmental Council, is a collaborative program that works with communities along the Monongahela River to recognize the river as a shared asset around which community and economic development can occur. The lineage of the River Town Program

can be traced to community revitalization programs such as the Main Street, Elm Street, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street program with their shared values of self-help, partnerships, incremental change, place-making, asset building, and safe, clean, and green communities. River Town Program goals also dovetail with the sustainable development movement's triple bottom line of balancing the needs of the environment, the economy, and our residents' quality of life (Stenzel, 2010). Overall, it's a program philosophy that's been embraced by citizens, business leaders, policy-makers, and philanthropists throughout the Monongahela River region and beyond.

How it Works

Presently, there are 11 river towns participating in the River Town Program, eight in Pennsylvania and three in West Virginia. The River Town Program only works in communities where invited. Once formally invited by the City Council or city manager, a community-based assessment is convened where local citizens assess their community and riverfront through the eyes of a visitor, considering strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities. River Town staff provide technical assistance and facilitation throughout this process. During this phase, a formal review of existing community plans is undertaken to identify complementary goals and action steps.

Once the assessment phase is complete, community action teams are formed. The action teams identify short, mid-term, and long-term projects they want to accomplish. These projects typically include amenity improvements such as: enhanced riverfront parks and marinas, walking and biking trails, public art, wayfinding signage, riverfront events and festivals, and branding and promotional campaigns. River town projects can be community-focused or regional in scope. For example, participating river towns have joined forces to develop a tourism marketing campaign to attract visitors to the Monongahela River region. Once these projects have been identified, river towns get to work making these projects happen on the ground. River Town staff facilitate this process and work with the community to identify and leverage external grants and resources to implement local projects. Over a three year time frame, the goal of the River Town Program is to transition program leadership and implementation over to the community action teams to achieve community sustainability and resilience goals.

Program Impacts and Next Steps

Using different metrics, the River Town Program has achieved a number of successes since its start in 2011. From five initial river towns, the program has grown to 11 communities in 2014. As of 2014, the River Town Program has assisted participating communities to leverage over \$1.3 million in external funds to support local river town projects. An annual survey of local residents has found that attitudes towards the river are becoming more positive about supporting both active and reflective outdoor recreation along the Monongahela River. Other outcomes of this project include welcome and directional signage, landscaping and streetscape improvements, a façade improvement in business districts, public art installations, park improvements and riverside event, festivals and concerts, all initiated and completed through local partnerships (Baxter & Malik, 2013).

Perhaps one of the most successful aspects of this program has been to foster greater regional collaboration. A regional coalition of River Town residents have now formed which is advocating for the region with county government and the state legislature as well as implementing a Mon River Valley marketing campaign to attract visitors to the region and promote local support and pride. Other goals of the River Town Program include engaging West Virginia University and California University, both river universities, in the long-term growth and prosperity of the Monongahela River Valley.

In conclusion, in an uncertain time for financing community development, the Monongahela Town Program is an alternative economic development program that is reaping both local and regional support and advocacy. In addition, as communities recognize the Monongahela River as a strategic asset to build community and economic development upon, they become more vested in its long-term sustainability. The River Town Program brings to life the vision of the sustainable development movement that the environment, the economy, and our quality of life can be brought into harmony through thoughtful and integrated community development.

Roundtable Discussion

Following a general overview of the River Town Program, a facilitated discussion took place, raising questions and issues about the program as well as lessons learned. Participants also shared their experiences with other regional planning initiatives having a community development component. There was considerable interest expressed in how to apply the River Town Program approach to participants' region and community. Questions focused in on where funding could be found to support such a program and how to build public support and participation. Base funding to support the administration of the River Town Program for up to three years has been provided by the Benedum Foundation, which funds community development and education programs in Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Benedum looks to the community and region to ensure the long-term sustainability of their funded programs. The organization that managed the River Towns grant is the Pennsylvania Environmental Council (PEC) who partnered with the Student Conservation Association (SCA), a national non-profit working to engage youth in conservation projects (Baxter & Malik, 2013). Strategic funds to support local River Town projects have been leveraged from many sources including state DCNR/DNR agencies, state DCED/DOH agencies, convention and visitors bureaus, and local businesses.

Building a strong base of local support has been central to the success of the River Town Program. Keys to success include: 1) Only go where invited; 2) Build a large tent representing a cross-section of the community; 3) Create allies by engaging important community and economic development authorities and interests; 4) Mobilize citizen power by partnering with area colleges, schools, and community service organizations; and 5) Share successes by getting the good word out through social media and letting others claim ownership over your ideas. The National Park Service Rivers, Trails and Conservation Service (RTCA Project Tips, 2009) provides a wonderful set of online tips for expanding public support for community-based conservation projects.

Participants also shared their experiences with other programs similar to the River Town Program. One participant had worked with a community development program in Vernonia, Oregon funded by the Ford Family Foundation. Located along the Nehalem River in northwest Oregon, Vernonia has overcome severe flooding on several occasions. Following a severe flood in 2007, community revitalization projects included expanding recreational use of the 21 mile Banks-Vernonia bike trail. Another example came from central Montana where communities along the Upper Clarks Fork River have been affected by downstream pollution from a copper mine in Butte, Montana. A regional project focused on watershed restoration and community revitalization is in the planning stage. Other examples included development of a cleanup plan on Northside, a Missoula, Montana neighborhood that is part of the White Pine Sash Superfund Facility. Community residents created the North Missoula Community Development Corp. formed to advocate for the neighborhood. In each of these cases, including the River Town Program, local universities and colleges are actively engaged in these community revitalization programs.

Implications & Action Steps

Judging from the level of interest expressed at the NERR management roundtable, there is growing public support for landscape-level or bioregional projects having both conservation and community revitalization objectives. This social trend likely reflects the growth and maturity of the sustainable development movement with its emphasis of the triple bottom line of projects that benefit people, profits, and the planet (Stenzel, 2010). The fact that all the regional projects discussed during the roundtable had strong governmental and philanthropic support suggest the rising significance of this social movement. An ongoing challenge and opportunity will be engaging the corporate sector in supporting these sustainable development initiatives.

Several roundtable participants suggested a future conference session that might highlight a number of these bioregional initiatives, comparing best practices, assessing programmatic needs, identifying database requirements, and mobilizing a policy and action agenda for these type of initiatives. Given the dominance of roundtable participation from academia, considerable interest was expressed in seeing regional universities play a more strategic role in advancing sustainable development in their region. In the case of the Monongahela River Town Program, two universities, West Virginia University and California University of Pennsylvania are providing technical assistance, student participation, and research support to this regional initiative.

With the increasing pace of global environmental change, often induced by human intervention, collaborative governance initiatives like the Monongahela River Town Program will likely grow in importance. Clearly, more effective forms of governance are needed that give community stakeholders a stronger voice in policy decisions affecting their livelihood. Future research will be needed to inform the design of and to assess the impact of emerging governance systems. Social science research and innovative public engagement strategies are needed to inform more effective approaches to bioregional governance.

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