Reconnecting Citizens with Citizens:
What Is the Role of Local Government?

Frank Benest

In the November 1998 issue of *PM*, the Healthy Cities movement and its relevance to local government was discussed. Rather than solely delivering services, the role of government also involves convening people to focus on community problem solving. In the process, the Healthy Cities approach helps to reconnect government with citizens. This article suggests that perhaps a more fundamental issue is how we all work to reconnect citizens with citizens.

n the face of overcrowded classrooms and deteriorating school facilities, senior citizens overwhelmingly vote against a needed school bond measure because their own children already are grown.

A neighbor sees the small boy from next door playing in the street, but, not wanting to "butt in," he says nothing to the child's parents.

Because the teenagers next door practice with their rock band until 10 p.m. and keep her awake, a householder calls the city's code enforcement office instead of talking to the kids.

Local government officials increasingly face similar examples of individuals and groups who seemingly do not care about the common good and take little personal responsibility for helping their neighbors or improving community life.

With their hectic lives, long commutes, and moves from one town or city to another, many people are no longer com-

mitted to their neighbors, their neighborhoods, or the larger community. People are overwhelmed with the demands of stressful work and family responsibilities, and, more and more, they simply "cocoon" when they get home. Our residential neighborhoods are merely collections of houses where we eat and sleep and withdraw from stressful existence. Instead of playing ballgames at the local park or even in our yards, or socializing on the front porch, we have added recreation rooms to our homes. Instead of shopping at stores, we order by catalogue or shop electronically over the Internet. In fact, as Daniel Whitehurst, former mayor of Fresno, California, once quipped, we hardly ever open the front door except for the pizza man.

Simply put, neighborhoods are no longer places where we make friends and develop supportive relationships, enjoy leisure time, work together to solve common problems, and develop a sense of history and identity.

As we become less committed to our communities, we have in fact seen the advent of what Whitehurst says are "throwaway cities." In the past, families settled in a place and worked with their neighbors and others over the long haul to improve community life. Nowadays, if a family is faced with a communal problem like crime, poor schools, or lack of parks, they move out of town or down the highway a few exits to the next community. People are not willing to fight for their neighborhoods because they have no sense of community.

Why Should Government Care?

From a local government perspective, the question is "So what?" I believe that we in local government should care, for several reasons.

First, many of us believe that the mission of local government is to enhance a community's quality of life by solving common problems, especially those not readily addressed by the private marketplace. Thus, if our mission is promoting a positive or even enriched quality of life,
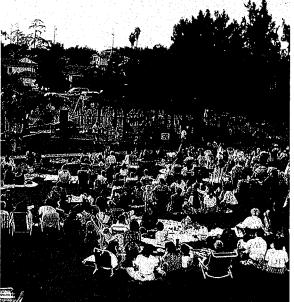
what bigger livability issue is there than a lack of human connections? In the face of a meager community life, people hunger for a sense of connection with others. The revival of churchgoing, the growth in volunteerism, and even the development of public spaces as community gathering places and the reinvestment in Main Street retail districts all suggest this real hunger for community.

Second, this lack of human bonds hurts the ability of local government to solve our increasingly complex, emotion-laden, and divisive problems. For instance, let's take the issue of balancing the need for promoting economic development with the need for protecting the environment, or the issue of reducing the many forms of community violence. It is next to impossible for local government to find positive approaches to these matters if people feel unconnected to each other and are thus unwilling to listen to each other, to explore other perspectives and approaches, and to compromise for the common good. In such a situation, government cannot govern. Although the trash is picked up, local government is unable to address effectively the big issues of the day.

Third, as Harvard Professor Robert Putnam has argued in his book *Bowling Alone*, as people become more isolated, they withdraw from the public realm and passively rely more and more on government to take care of their problems. Putnam believes that active, problem-solving citizens are transformed into passive consumers of government services. In the process, local government simply becomes overwhelmed.

What Really Is "Community"?

The term "community" is bandied about to such an extent that it has lost

much of its meaning. If there is a need for community, we ask ourselves, well, what exactly is it? We certainly need to define the word if local government is to develop practical strategies to enhance the connections among people.

From my perspective, "community" is composed of a number of interrelated elements:

A sense of belonging. A community is more than the sum of its individuals or households. In a true community, individual lives are fulfilled through shared experiences with others. By means of rituals, common norms and practices, and celebrations, individuals identify themselves as parts of something greater than themselves and feel that they belong.

A sense of roots, history, and tradition. People with a sense of community often relate back in time to an ongoing history or tradition. Feeling rooted in a larger context of history provides meaning for people and helps forge a common bond with other community members.

A feeling of "place." There is a "there, there." The community has a sense of character or uniqueness.

A sense of identity. As Putnam notes, people identify with a place and say to themselves, "I am home." Networks of

interaction broaden a person's sense of self, developing the "I" into "we."

Inclusiveness. John Gardner, author of *Building Community*, says that community is characterized by "wholeness incorporating diversity." A true community may incorporate people of different ages, ethnicities, incomes, educational backgrounds, and the like. In this era of accelerating change, a community of diverse elements has a greater capacity to adapt and renew itself. Moreover, because of a sense of belonging, differences and even conflicts are accepted. Gardner believes that people may disagree on how best to achieve the goals of the total group but not on which goals and values are in the best interest of the community.

Giving and getting. Relationships are reciprocal. People are willing to help each other out because they are being helped. In such a supportive environment, over time, people give and get. This is the social contract.

Different kinds of contributions. Depending on his or her talents and capabilities, everyone contributes to community life and to beneficial projects in one fashion or another. It is like a barn raising: someone hammers while someone else holds the ladder or brings the food. People get involved.

Self-regulation. A strong community is a self-regulating one, says Gabriele Steffen in the *Making Cities Livable Newsletter* article "Commercial Enterprise, Virtual Reality, or the Concrete, Real City?" Because of the mutual bonds and values of the community, people monitor each other and themselves. Public safety is enhanced because neighbors have their "eyes on the street." People take care of themselves and their neighborhoods. They pick up their own litter, as well as other people's trash they find on the sidewalk. And they do not call the city code enforcement officer as the first resort in case of infractions.

Face-to-face interaction. While some would argue that "electronic villages" are a growing form of community, I for one believe that face-to-face interaction still is a must. People need to spend time with each other. As Edward Blakely and Mary Snyder have stated in a recent article on "Fortress Communities," there can be no social contract without social contact.

Learning through community. John Gardner believes that "the community teaches." People internalize the concept of community and the value of community through instruction (especially as children), observation, and participation. When community members serve as role models for others, "they teach the truth by living it."

In short, a community is more than a sum of land uses with or without a defining geopolitical boundary. It is a physical and social context in which people can feel security and support because they belong to something larger than themselves. They contribute their own unique gifts. And they care for each other. Like speaker Gary Squier said at a conference last year, not only do neighbors ask, "How are you?" They also care about your answer.

What Are the Obstacles to Community?

To say that there are barriers to building a sense of community is an understatement. In contemporary urban and suburban life, we are faced with a great number of complex obstacles.

Radical individualism. In past times, people certainly looked out for their private interests, but there also seemed to be some concern about the common good. Nowadays, everyone seems to be a special interest, and "community" has turned into a mere collection of special-interest groups. Few individuals are willing to consider the common interest, much less to compromise for the benefit of the total community. The logical extreme of this

trend toward radical individualism is the advent of separatists and militias.

Fragmentation. We are an increasingly diverse society. At the beginning of the third millennium, for instance, California will be a "majority minority" society. In my own community of Brea, a predominantly Caucasian city of 35,000 people, 35 languages and dialects are spoken in the households served by our small kindergarten-through-12th-grade school district.

In addition to ethnicity and language, income, age, education, interests, and experiences increasingly separate people. There are no longer only three major TV networks and a few national general-interest magazines, like *Look* or *Life*, that tie everyone together and help fashion a national culture. Rather, we are overwhelmed by 200+ cable television channels and thousands of special-interest periodicals that cater to a proliferation of micro-niches in the marketplace.

A hectic, auto-oriented lifestyle. People in our car-oriented communities have little time to relate and interact outside of work and family. Many of us are commuters who spend one-and-a-half to two hours on the road to and from work daily. When we finally do arrive home, we retreat into our hermetically sealed homes. If we have any energy left, we cook dinner. If we have kids, we play with them and then put them to bed. Maybe then, we have a few moments for our spouses or ourselves. Only rarely do we have the time or energy to go to a homeowners' or tenants' meeting, a PTA workshop, or a city budget forum.

Poorly designed communities. Contemporary planning and zoning standards have contributed to auto-centered communities. Residential neighborhoods are segregated from other important uses, and we are forced to get into a car to go to work, to shop, to visit a restaurant, or to get our shoes repaired. In most suburban housing tracts, there are few porches, and any outside playing or

family activity happens in the backyard. We rarely even see our neighbors.

Moreover, it is not often that we simply hang out in our community, talking to others or simply watching the passing parade. There are few real downtowns or vibrant public places that serve as community focal points. At best, we pass time in crowded yet lifeless malls.

Two-parent-working families. It is fair to say that in years past, one parent usually stayed home and often was available to get involved in civic organizations that promoted community. With two-parent-working households and people retiring later and later, there are fewer and fewer citizens who have the time and energy to participate in community-building activities.

Also, of course, with more people working and with our traditional auto-dependent suburban form of development, fewer people walk our neighborhood streets during the day, and thus there are fewer "eyes on the streets," allowing for more crime and other mischief.

Segregation of income groups and generations. More and more, different income and "lifestyle" groups, as well as different generations, are living apart. For example, escalating housing costs often force young families and elderly households out of their hometowns, where they have spent most of their lives. In such cases, fewer opportunities exist to put down the long-term roots and achieve the continuity that are key elements in community building.

The ultimate expressions of the physical segregation of generations and income and lifestyle groups are exclusive, gated communities. This "forting up," experts say, undercuts the inclusiveness of communities and separates one group from another.

What Can We Do?

It is natural for many of us to long for the small-town ideal and for true feelings of belonging. However, are we

searching hopelessly for a long-lost Mayberry that never will be recaptured? Or can we in local government, working with citizens, develop practical approaches within the context of the urban and suburban life of the 21st century to promote a sense of community? I believe that there is in fact a wide array of potential strategies that can enhance the human connections among us all.

To build community, there is no single answer, no one solution. Rather, we must integrate a number of approaches involving urban planning and social action.

Urban Planning

To promote community, we need to better plan and design the physical environment.

The New Urbanism and smart growth. The "New Urbanism" philosophy and the advocacy of "smart growth" both suggest the use of more compact, infill, and mixed-use forms of development. Different kinds of housing—integrated with retail services, public facilities, and other uses—allow for walking, biking, public transit, and other alternatives to the car. Houses feature porches and face the street. To create community gathering places, we need to go beyond just the practice of clustering mailboxes. Our cities and towns need walkable village or traditional downtown retail streets, as well as inviting public spaces and gath-

ering spots like plazas, town squares, outdoor marketplaces, central parks, and pavilions.

Design touches. Successful urban planning is enhanced by small yet thoughtful design features. Small touches can make for intimacy. As Danish planner Jan Gehl once stated: "It was the little things that made the place come alive, the placement of a bollard to block traffic, a bench here and there facing activity, the planting of some trees."

Place making. To generate a sense of place, many localities have built such distinctive "icons" as the St. Louis Gateway Arch, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Sydney Opera House, and even the Eiffel Tower. These are symbols of who we are as a place and a community. They enhance pride, self-esteem, and a sense of identity.

To promote their heritage, many cities and counties have of course invested in historic preservation efforts. Preserving older structures as well as organizing history-based pageants, oral history projects, and other activities that build on the past and its traditions all help in small ways to counteract the rootlessness of contemporary life.

Another place-making approach is commissioning and installing public art of all kinds. Chemanus, British Columbia, conducts a mural festival

each year. Brea, California, requires developers to commission public sculpture and other public artworks for any new development of more than $500,000 in value. To date, Brea enjoys a portfolio of 115 public sculptures along its streets in front of housing developments, shopping centers, office buildings, and even gas stations.

A final, related strategy is promoting "nature in the city." Urban and suburban environments that incorporate open-space preserves, nature trails, lakes, walking paths, tree groves, and protected hillsides and canyons all evoke a special sense of place. Residents of such communities are proud to call these distinctive places home.

Social Action

Good city and county planning is necessary but totally insufficient to build community. Successful urban planning must be complemented with social action undertaken by local government in conjunction with nonprofit organizations and other community partners. Here are some recommended social action strategies.

Promote "public work." Harry Boyte of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship maintains that "public work" can help people enhance their connections with other members of their communities. The National League of Cities' publication *Connecting Citizens and Their Government: Civility, Responsibility, and Local Democracy* describes it this way: public work involves citizens in coming together as "producers"; in contributing their skills, talents, and energies toward a solution; and in producing something of lasting value.

Neighbors or citizens at large work together on block-parent programs, library fund-raising campaigns, community mural projects, child care co-ops, and intergenerational programs. Public work, as opposed to mere voting, is the heart of citizenship.

Local government can directly support such public work through the ef-forts of the police, recreation and parks, or community or neighborhood development departments. In most cases, however, these community-building activities require a shift from the typical service delivery or "vending machine" mode of most government agencies to an approach more closely resembling that of an old-fashioned barn raising. This shift in mission, focus, strategies, and use of resources usually requires a healthy dose of vision, leadership, training, and new management systems.

Assist mediating institutions. Because of the growing gap between citizens and their local governments, it is wise for public agencies to work with so-called mediating institutions. These nonprofit, often community-based groups serve an informal liaison function between the individual and the government. In other words, they "mediate" between the individual and his or her government. People take personal responsibility for common problems through what columnist George Will calls "society's little platoons," such as PTAs, scouting organizations, church groups, or youth sports clubs.

While government has often shied away from supporting religious groups, partnerships with all kinds of faith-based groups make sense in respect to building community. Faith-based organizations do public work, they foster strong traditions, and they promote a sense of acceptance and belonging, especially for mobile and rootless families no longer living close to relatives. One classic example is Habitat for Humanity, a Christian ministry that partners with low-income people, businesses, churches, community groups, and local governments in "raising homes" out of love for God and community.

To support mediating organizations, local government can provide seed grants, land, facilities, equipment, training, and other forms of technical assistance.

Help develop neighborhood groups. Because the neighborhood is one of the most basic building blocks of community life, local government can help organize new neighborhood groups or support existing ones. Homeowner associations, neighborhood watch groups, block-parent networks, and elementary school PTAs all bring about social interaction and communal problem solving.

To promote the effectiveness of a neighborhood group, local government can provide a staff liaison person who can help coordinate technical resources for the group. Local government also can help develop neighborhood leadership academies so that neighborhood associations can eventually run themselves and successfully address their neighborhood problems. In fact, leadership development programs often attempt to create and develop "neighborhood navigators." These navigators—instead of local government staff—act as liaisons between neighbors and civic institutions that can offer technical assistance to neighborhood groups confronting social problems.

Through these leadership development programs, we can identify and engage a greater number of people who are willing to become what speaker and writer John Gardner calls "the responsibles," citizens who become actively involved in community life and carry the burdens of our free society.

Organize around compelling issues. While formal or informal structure is important, structure must intersect with issues. To assist families in breaking out of their cocoons, local government by itself or with partners can help neighbors deal with such emotionally charged matters as neighborhood crime, the lack of child care or recreational facilities, new development, and traffic problems. To grab the attention of typically overwhelmed people, local government staff can go door to door with volunteers, encouraging people to meet with their neighbors at the local elementary school, recreation or church hall, or even in

someone's house for a "family-room dialogue" about the common concern.

Let neighborhoods serve themselves. To address physical blight and social problems, many local governments have tried to develop neighborhood service-delivery systems. These efforts often have included multidepartmental teams assigned to targeted neighborhoods, as well as service partnerships among city, county, school district, and nonprofit agencies. To promote community, however, local government needs to help neighborhoods and other groups take responsibility for their own services. For instance, with various kinds of government assistance (seed grants, facilities, equipment, training), a neighborhood group can program its own local park, beautify its neighborhood, provide an after-school program, or run a homework center.

Another self-help approach is assisting neighborhood groups in forming service exchanges or bartering networks. These networks allow residents in a neighborhood or throughout the city to earn "good-neighbor points" by providing to others their skills, talents, and resources. These points can then be used to obtain services or resources from others in the service exchange.

Reconnect generations. It is difficult to build and maintain community without continuity. Consequently, local government needs to find ways to help keep a neighborhood or a larger community whole and complete as a home for the young and the old, as well as for those in between. To avoid the segregation of the generations, local government, working with the private and nonprofit sectors, must integrate and not isolate affordable housing (including intergenerational housing developments) for elderly people and for young families within a community. Intergenerational service programs also are helpful, especially those that use the talents, skills, and wisdom of older folks to help children or struggling families.

Celebrate community. Social interaction and community identification can be built through celebrations and other special-event programming. To increase positive interaction at the neighborhood level, Brea has designed a Block Party Initiative. The city promotes block party kits that include forms, checklists, sample activities, and other tips on organizing a successful street party. The city maintenance department offers barricades and signs. Residents can even ask the fire department to send an engine or the police department to send an officer assigned to the area. Some neighborhoods also ask a councilmember to come over and share in the hot dogs and festivities.

Concerts in the park, outdoor summer film festivals, farmers' markets, street dances, and fairs also can bring people together and build a sense of community. The message is that we as a community have fun together, celebrate who we are, and have worthwhile traditions.

Such celebrations may invoke to some degree the positive feelings and relations that aid in building a framework on which to do future public work together.

How Can We Get Started?

If we accept the premise that community building can help localities to govern better and to deal more effectively with complex challenges, how can local government leaders get started?

First, leaders must advocate the need to change our problem-solving style. For many decades, we professionals have promoted the concept of government as a vending machine. Citizens become consumers feeding the vending machine, which then dispenses services. To promote community, leaders must promote the barn-raising efforts already described, with the city or county helping people to solve their own problems together. As people confront local government with their concerns and needs, it would be ego-satisfying for us to try to "rescue" them by solving their problems for them. Instead, local government leaders must

demand citizenship from people.

Certainly, citizens have rights, but they also have responsibilities. Citizens are responsible for informing themselves about issues and working with other citizens and with their local government to address common problems. When people say, "What is our local government going to do for us?" government leaders should strongly counter with "What are we all going to do as a community?"

Second, cities and counties must take the long view. A sense of community is not created overnight. Rather, community is built incrementally, step by step, using a variety of interrelated strategies.

Third, as part of this commitment to promoting community, public leaders need to incorporate community building as part of our local government mission and goals and should include community-building projects in our annual workplans. In terms of specific projects, we need to start some place, any place, and then build on our initial efforts.

Fourth, to use community-building strategies effectively, local government leaders must examine and then modify traditional leadership styles, management systems, resource allocation priorities, and even vocabulary. It is a new way of doing business.

And finally, leaders must understand and articulate the benefits of community. A vibrant community offers long-term economic benefits. Cities and counties operate within a competitive marketplace; localities with a distinctive sense of place and a vital community life are able to compete successfully for residents and businesses and to attract investments of all kinds. Thus, developing a strong community generates tremendous economic payoffs, as well as helping local government to better address the issues of the day. By marketing these benefits, local government leaders can build political support for their community-building initiatives. **PM**

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