

**To:** Mayor and City Council  
cc: John Szerlag, City Manager  
Lori Grigg Bluhm, City Attorney  
**From:** Robin Beltramini, Mayor Pro Tem  
**Subject:** *The Power of Democratic Governance: Engaging Citizens as Partners*, New Orleans, LA, April 21-23, 2005  
**Date:** May 2, 2005

I learned so much during these two days. In small groups, and large, there was extensive discussion about the changes in government, and relationships with and of citizens. The overwhelming theme was that times have changed and we must change in how we do business in order to regain the trust of our citizens. As I was listening to the various speakers and participating in the dialogue, it occurred to me that this was about taking to government, Mary Kay Ash's mantra "People support that which they help create." Great emphasis was put on working directly with citizens, not just representing (what we believe are) their interests.

Benjamin Barber, Professor at University of Maryland and principal of the Democracy Collaborative, really set up the big picture. We live in a dramatically different world than we did even 50 years ago. Our major influencers are no longer mayors, teachers and clergy, but private media—internet, television, movies, cellular communication, etc.—all peddling the benefit of profit. These small "sound bites" create what Barber calls an Attention Deficit Syndrome which precludes sustained participation. And, citizenship takes time. Secondly, there is widespread movement toward privatization and minimization of government. While this may save a few tax dollars, it could undermine broad democratic participation through its very limitations. Thirdly, we now are globally interdependent. Issues are interdependent while resources are locally limited. Therefore, interrelationships between cities must be more than ceremonial.

Through a question and answer period, Barber stressed finding ways to create a sense of community and interdependence to reinvigorate democracy in our cities. Letting citizens debate with each other solutions to various challenges would prove helpful in getting the entire argument into the discussion. Traditionally, we are "one issue citizens." Citizens must be given the opportunity to partner and create their own destiny as a community. Government must become the facilitator, more than the doer.

Angela Glover Blackwell, CEO of PolicyLink, gave us a discourse on the conditions of democracy. Generally, those conditions: are a fair and equitable opportunity structure; broad economic participation; broad civic participation, and public policies aligned with democratic practice. Blackwell's theme that opportunity is dictated in large part by where one lives was illustrated through various examples—including the availability of reliable public transportation in metropolitan Detroit. In Troy, the conditions are present. However, we need to educate that democratic participation is not just voting. Citizens and residents need to be engaged throughout the decision-making process—a particular ingredient to narrowing the gap between "the haves and have-nots." We have both ends of that spectrum here in Troy.

John Ott, attorney and former faculty member in Public Policy Studies at Duke University, shared methodology for facilitating community change. While showcasing much of Stephen Covey's theory, "All change is inside out," Ott talked specifically about where to start. In our

case, we would look first to strengthening the sense of community among our very diverse citizenry. The first question to answer is, “Who are we?” Get the answer to that question through relationships and interconnectedness of our citizens and residents. We all need to move beyond talking primarily to/about folks like us. What about talking to the rest of the community? Get secondary motives out on the table so that they can be engaged early. If not, they will reassert later and undermine the process and decisions. Self-interest is not in and of itself a bad thing, nor is secondary interest, or shadow interest. But, in discussions we must recognize the difference between “my vision” and “our vision” (which may not be fully articulated and decided). Most of all, for democratic decision-making and visioning to occur, government must create a space for citizen relationships to grow, for folks to share their stories without judgment, a safe place for the conflict that makes decision-making messy, but valid and sustainable.

Much of the time was spent reviewing specific case studies of cities and villages that had engaged their citizens to effect change in their communities. The overarching themes, or values, in all successful efforts were partnering and “elbow grease.” Citizens, businesses, and residents, in all cases met together, discussed together, and came to a shared vision. Then, they worked together, not just to get the local government to recognize and validate their vision, but to help that vision become a reality. These folks gave time—time for long discussions with each other to find the uncommon, common ground for their efforts; time to fan out into the community to further the vision, and tweak it if necessary; time to formulate a broad-based vision; time to put forth the effort to make that dream a reality. It is not just citizens telling government what they want. It is citizens, with government, deciding what they want, and determining the role each will play in attaining the goal. It is an investment of personal capital (i.e., time and effort) by all participants.

The following are some of my own concluding thoughts on why such a process would be good for Troy, and how we might make it work. I believe that without putting into place such a process, elected leadership in this community will continue to second-guess and revisit decisions.

First, we illustrate all three of Barber’s “symptoms” of a changed world. We have a growing ethnic population which needs recognition. While this brings us a well-educated workforce to tout, it can create conflict from the contradictory value systems such diverse cultures bring to the community. Ethnic culture is homogenous. The American community is not. However, such first-hand familiarity with global forces can be used to strengthen us.

Second, we have a natural tendency to want to reinvent government to be more like a business, with greater emphasis on efficiency and customer service even while showing empirically that we are already a very efficient city by almost any measure. There is a current feeling of alienation from government, not just generally, but right here in Troy shown through a growth of the “say no” citizen groups and political candidates. To the extent that we think of citizens as customers, and treat them as such, we will encourage them to think of themselves only as taxpayers. This vending machine mentality can actually magnify the sense of alienation. Additionally, we need to guard against thinking that “no news is good news” or that the citizenry is apathetic. I don’t think that is the case at all. More citizens don’t vote because they don’t believe it will make a difference. Groups don’t get more folks to a meeting because, more often than not, it leads to another meeting, not to action.

Third, while we have a well-educated population and 53 faith institutions in town, it is the media that influence our citizens. Some weeks it is the City Council meeting on cable

television, others it is a letter to the editor or front page story in the newspaper, or it is the automated phone call or email from a group/business/individual promoting some action or value. As community leaders this can lead to influences that make us second-guess.

Representative democracy and participatory democracy are neither mutually exclusive, nor are they wildly compatible. There is a natural tension there. Our challenge is to build bridges within the tension because we have electors, citizens, and residents who fall firmly, almost exclusively, into one theory or the other. Communities operate best when there is a place for both interests.

We have talked about a new community visioning process. We have initiated and even completed many items in the *Troy Futures* report of 1993. However, our community has changed since then. Even decisions we are making now to enhance that vision are running into vocal opposition, at the Council table and from the residents. When listening to the reasons for opposition, some are based on need, some on cost, and some on vision. This is illustrative of how our community has changed within the last decade and how the *Troy Futures* vision is no longer relevant to significant numbers of stakeholders. The 1993 report has become a “wish list” that is no longer accurate.

This Democratic Governance initiative is way we can create places and methods for citizens, decision-makers, and other stakeholders to formulate policy—together. It is more than simply enabling citizens who want to affect the political process. Democratic Governance provides ways for weighing all policy options, not just the potentially “winnable” ones. It gives government a process to facilitate citizens having those crucial conversations with each other to build partnerships and understanding that ultimately build community, giving credibility to all points of view and frames of reference. It is collaboration, on the ground, among citizens, residents, businesses and leadership. This empowers our citizens by truly linking deliberation and decision. This method turns a wish-list into a sustainable set of interests and the policies and mechanisms to realize community goals.

Thomas Jefferson once stated, “The remedy for problems and deficits is more democracy.” Troy has fiscal and social challenges. I believe more democracy, of the participatory kind, will lead us to sustainable positive resolution of these issues. There will be a continuing place for representative democracy, but it will be secondary to the participatory kind. Our job is two-fold. First, we must facilitate the stakeholder discussions that build vision and ways to carry it out. Second, we must recognize that in some instances, it is our job to lead and to decide—and to stick with that decision. This second part has become difficult because our stakeholders have not validated the vision recently, nor put much recent effort into its realization—either one would have assured us of the consistent propriety of our actions.

As always, I have much anecdotal information as well as further factual data and am happy to share. I wanted to get this to you quickly because of the relevance I see for this process in our future visioning. I learned quite a bit, and made a plethora of contacts to act as resources if we need them. I’m happy to answer any questions this brief synopsis may generate. Obviously, I believe that adopting Democratic Governance principals would be highly beneficial to the citizenry in general and to the efficacy of our local government.

Thank you for this learning opportunity.

R.E.B.