

Civic Engagement Indicator Planning Meeting 9-25-2000

Three council members and guest Ann Arkin attempted to draft civic engagement indicators on Monday night, September 25th. What we did was discover different meanings of the term "civic engagement" and also different frames of reference as to where to apply it.

Civic engagement at the neighborhood level seems to be the focus of our attention so far. Our meeting of August 23, 1999 and of last August seemed to have defined the scope of civic engagement to be limited to discreet, identifiable neighborhoods.

In devising ways to measure the extent of civic engagement in such targeted neighborhoods, we presume that we want to measure how much participation goes on among neighbors in areas such as governance, local councils and other public meetings, use of park space and libraries, participation in all sorts of cultural events such as concerts, street fairs, farmers' markets, art walks, participation in service clubs, churches, and volunteer organizations, and also such intangible interactions as seeing people as those we recognize as a member of our community even though we may not know them.

Such indicators may be said to measure the health and "livability" of such communities, and we can design ways of measuring this through statistical means as well as through public polling.

However in order to address the pressing issues of economic and environmental stratification within the county as a whole, and to try to measure the social, environmental and economic effects of the widening gap between rich and poor in the county, another sort of "engagement" indicator needs to be devised. Without such a broader focus, the links between civic engagement as a subset of social equity and among the other two elements of sustainability-- environmental health and economic well-being-- will be hard to discover.

Without civic engagement on the broader scale, perhaps involving the whole county, there can be little raising of consciousness about the interdependent impacts of economic and environmental policy. Unless people living in neighborhoods in Santa Paula, for example, understand the impact their environmental decisions have on people living in neighborhoods in Ventura and vice versa, consensus about sustainable strategies that support both communities is unlikely to be reached.

The great problems of Ventura County gravitate around this issue: the social and economic divisions between cities and neighborhoods and the widening gap between rich and poor. This is where the impact of SOAR will be most dramatic, for we must imagine that in locating such things as affordable housing those on opposite sides of the gap will have very different ideas about where it might go and how much of it we need given the limits on land. And as long as our focus remains local, then special interests with unsustainable designs on the county can prevail.

This problem also raises the unpleasant issues of de facto racism and environmental racism which characterize Ventura County as a whole. Unless we're willing to come the terms with these realities and offer a fresh way to view them in the context of sustainable strategies, I believe we are not addressing civic engagement in its most dynamic form--as a key component of social equity.

Various ideas were mentioned as to the lack of a county-wide forum or structure for civic engagement at this broad and complex level. It was observed that such civic engagement is essential when political structures fail to provide it. (SOAR is itself a measure of such failure.)

We briefly surveyed the existing groups in the county that may deal with this larger question and found few, perhaps besides ourselves, who are willing at least to claim to speak for and encompass this larger "county" community. In terms of governance, there is the County Supervisors themselves, VECOG, and a Santa Clara Valley organization called Heritage Valley that looks after regional issues. In terms of business, there is VECEDA, the chambers of commerce, agricultural groups, and perhaps a Highway 101 tech group. In the public sphere, there are newspapers, a few NGO's like us that take the big picture focus, and organizations such as the Audubon society. But it was said that taking all of these together, the dialogue and active participation in or civic engagement about our mutual interests at this large level of the county is, as one person put it, "only window dressing."

(By the way in today's LA Times editorials there is statement lauding the strengthening of the various LAFCO's in a recent assembly bill just to address this large picture issue when it comes to sprawl and growth management.)

The problem here seems to boil down to how much access individuals have to engage each other on issues of county-wide planning as opposed to neighborhood planning. Without his engagement, I for one argue, there is little possibility of "raising environmental consciousness" at all, since the environment is not limited to one's local neighborhood. Social equity and justice cannot be served and diversity cannot become a strength without dialogue, engagement, understanding and finally cooperation across the socio-economic gaps and the ethnic divisions that characterize them.