

THE BELLEVUE EXPERIENCE.

A CASE STUDY.

*"It wasn't the money. The issue was
how can government get away with doing
this and not tell anybody about it."*

A Citizen of Bellevue Washington



United States
Environmental Protection
Agency

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One citizen going to the City Council with concerns about pollution in her backyard stream initiated a process which became the hottest controversy in the history of Bellevue, Washington. City Government is still reverberating from the power of outraged citizens who feel they haven't been consulted about decisions that affect them.

Bellevue's experience includes both constructive, long-term public participation and "dissent-after-decision" involvement. How the conflict was managed and what the city learned about public participation offers guidance for other communities faced with solving today's complex problems.

*"You can't run a government talking to yourself.
You have to run a government talking to other people."*

A Bellevue Citizen

WHAT IS PUBLIC PARTICIPATION?

Many variations are possible from citizens observing, voting, advising, or drafting legislation. Ideally, public participation is an open, cooperative, ongoing process in which an agency presents policy and planning issues for public discussion, and through which it receives community input and feedback from diverse groups. Its object is to arrive at technically workable plans which meet the special needs, concerns and values of a community, and thereby to have support from a broad spectrum of the public before implementation.

ALL AMERICAN CITY

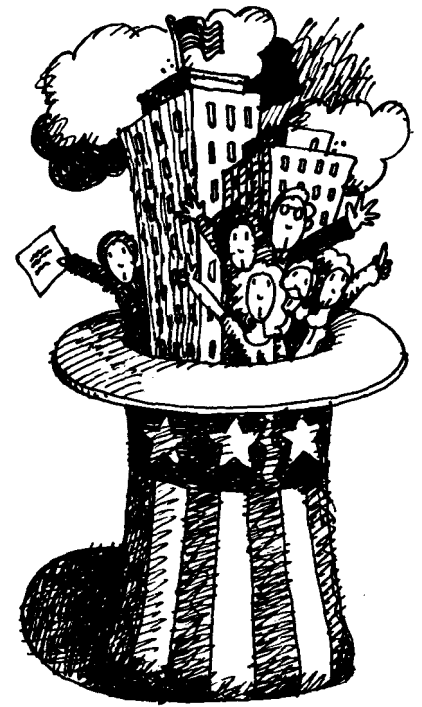
Bellevue, with a population of 69,000, is the fourth largest city in the state of Washington. Its citizens look south toward Mt. Rainier and east to Seattle across Lake Washington. Rapid growth has accelerated its change from a classic bedroom suburb into an economically-balanced satellite city in its own right.

Its Council-Manager government spends more on planning per capita than any other city in the state. The mayor and City Council members serve part time.

Besides the Seattle media, Bellevue has two radio stations and a daily newspaper, the *Daily Journal American*. (It was a weekly when the controversy began.)

An award as an "All American City" reinforced what its inhabitants already knew about life in Bellevue: it is family-oriented with good schools and services; the economic, educational level is high; and it is picturesque with streams meandering through its neighborhoods.

Because of Bellevue's quick expansion, it never had time to develop a traditional storm sewer system with extensive underground pipes for streams. As a result, most of Bellevue's streams are above ground . . . a source of civic pride, and the beginning point in the conflict.



THE PROBLEM

"Nature provides a drainage system. Let's work with nature."

A Bellevue Citizen

In the late 1960's, homeowners living along Kelsey Creek noticed changes in their backyard streams—increased runoff after storms, erosion of the banks, siltation and fewer fish. One resident, Joan Way, wanted to do something to preserve and protect the stream, so she began a program of self-education in water resource management. She became convinced that soon Bellevue would have to face up to problems of storm drainage runoff.

Bellevue's Department of Public Works didn't have a comprehensive plan for drainage, and problems were handled on a crisis basis. Rainstorms meant flooding streams fed by water rushing from nonabsorbent surfaces like concrete. After the storm, the problems of runoff again were invisible.

In the spring of 1970, Mrs. Way attended a City Council session to express her concern that a proposed development of Kelsey Creek might further damage the stream. The City Council quickly responded by appointing her and six others to become a Citizens Advisory Committee on Stream Resources to develop standards for stream preservation.

Instead of taking six months as planned, the Streams Committee met for more than three years and became expert in the technical, long-range subject of watershed management. Working with planners and consultants, they considered alternative ways of providing storm and surface water drainage, including the usual one of routing through underground pipes.

They felt that Bellevue with its open streams was in a unique position to come up with a solution that would preserve natural beauty as well as provide drainage for most of the city.

Late in 1973, the Streams Committee proposed a comprehensive plan for stormwater management, including the formation of a utility to oversee the program and a service charge based on the amount of impervious surface on each property.

The City Council took the citizen group's advice and began drawing up an ordinance to create the utility. The Council called for an "all out public education program aimed at building support for the project."



WHY UTILIZE THE OPEN STREAM SYSTEM?

Bellevue's Open Stream System is more than:

- A scenic and panoramic attraction
- A haven and home for wildlife
- A recreation area for people pleasure
- A buffer zone for residential communities
- A strip (linear) park or an aqua greenbelt

It is nature's way of handling:

- Storm runoff
- Surface water drainage
- Sifting of water pollutants

WHY CAN'T WE USE IT AS IT IS?

We've monkeyed so much with Mother Nature as we built our homes, driveways, patios, commercial buildings and parking expanses that we have:

- Destroyed the natural ground cover that intercepted rainfall and absorbed as much as 95% of it into the earth, creating ground water that fed plants and streams all year around
- Channeled rushing water so rapidly into waterways that it erodes stream banks, causing property damage and building up sediment which destroys fish spawning grounds, wildlife habitat and natural drainage efficiency
- Created a safety hazard for children attracted by fiercely-rushing torrents of storm-swollen streams
- Allowed pollutants and trash to reduce natural drainage capabilities of the open stream system

Reproduced from the League of Women Voters. Lake Washington East

*"How do you put sex appeal in storm drainage?
How do you collar someone and say: 'Hey, I want to tell
you about storm drainage—this is really vital to you.'"*

Local Journalist

The public information program was plagued by lack of time, money and a clear line of responsibility (who should inform the voters: city staff or volunteer committee?). Since the subject does not translate easily into something interesting or understandable to an average voter, no matter how much publicity appeared, few people noticed.

Throughout years of working together, the Streams Committee, City Council and staff had developed such rapport with each other that the committee members became almost an extension of staff. They all supported the plan and were confident that the public would too.

*"We were so entranced with looking in the mirror that we
didn't see the people sneaking up on us.
We were completely unprepared for the avalanche of protest."*

Public Information Officer, City of Bellevue

In March 1974, the City Council signed legislation establishing the Utility and a system for stormwater management. Bellevue became one of the first cities to address the issue so completely. They were proud of their innovative solution to a problem as old as cement and blacktopped land.

*"We thought it was a very progressive idea, we were proud of it,
it was environmentally sound and saved money. You can't beat that!"*

Member of City Council

A TACTICAL ERROR

Target date for the first Utility service charge billing was late June for the July-August period. The deadline wasn't met because of data processing problems. Instead, a notice was sent with the regular water bill announcing a two-month delay in the start-up of the fee and further explaining the Utility and its responsibilities. The slight response to the notice was, for the most part, positive.

The first bills were sent in September. To make up for the postponed billing, the charge was for a four-month period (average of less than \$8.00 per household, slightly more for business). Since no explanation accompanied these bills, people assumed the charge was for one month. And most were taken by surprise. Unaware of the formation of the Utility and unprepared for this new "Tax," they were furious and let the city know it.

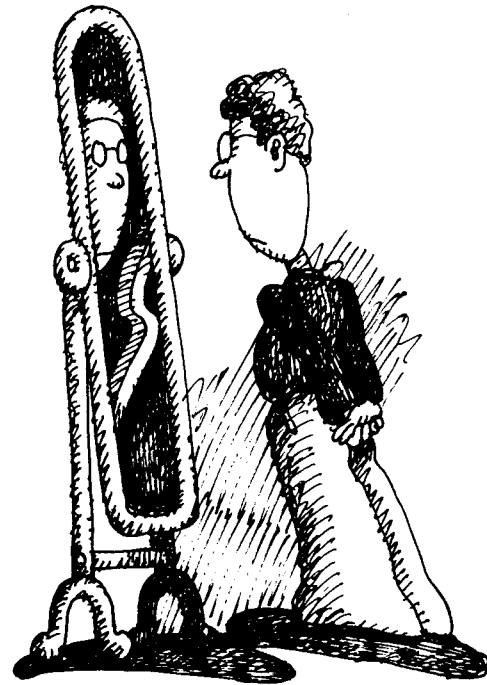
"The city has done this to us. You have rammed it down our throats."

A Bellevue Citizen

The City Council was confused. They had responded in good faith to a citizen group's concerns, presented a model solution to a nagging urban problem and had carried out a public information campaign. Now, they ended up with a citizens' revolution.

*"The phones started ringing. They were screaming and
they were just irrational. And then the newspapers started
and the letters-to-the-editor started. The charge we
heard most was 'How could you do this and not even
have told us about it?' We honestly and truly thought we had."*

Member of City Council



THE OPPOSITION ORGANIZES

The double billing crystallized opponents into a strong force. They had an issue that directly concerned the public, they had visibility through extensive media coverage and they had a definite goal—stopping the Utility.

*"With all of those people as angry as they were,
I was afraid there was going to be a vigilante mob . . ."*

Organizer of VOTE

The members of VOTE (Victory Over Tax Excess) held public meetings, spoke at City Council meetings, drew up a petition and, in six weeks, collected 8,500 signatures (40% of all those voting in the previous general election). The petition called for the City Council to either rescind the enabling legislation for the Utility or put the Utility question on the next local ballot for a vote of the people.

There were as many different reasons—and misconceptions—for opposition to the Utility as there were signatures on the petition. But most criticism fell into these categories:

1. People were surprised by the formation of the Utility and thought the City was "putting one over" on the public.
2. Some suspected duplication of effort with the Department of Public Works and charged "empire building."
3. Others thought the importance of the problem was exaggerated, calling the Utility "a Cadillac response to a Vega Problem."
4. The service charge was mistaken for a tax which the public didn't have an opportunity to vote on and which could be increased without voter approval.
5. Distrust of elected officials (former President Nixon had recently resigned) and frustration with spiraling inflation combined to make the Utility a lightning rod for people's generalized complaints about government.

"The issue wasn't the money, it was the way it was handled."

A Bellevue citizen

GOVERNMENT ANSWERS

City Government's response was low-key. The mayor acknowledged inadequate public relations in terms of informing the public about the new Utility and called the double billing a mistake. He asked that a decision on the fate of the Utility be based on a rational discussion of the issues and not an "emotional outburst." He proposed a reevaluation of the entire problem by a 13-member Drainage Utility Task Force which would include members of VOTE as well as supporters. This assured a wide range of input into the decision-making process. During this time, the service charge was reduced to a token amount.

*"We stubbed our toe administratively and possibly
legislatively. But we're human beings too."*

City Council Member

The controversy cooled to the relief of City Council members, but ahead were three more rollercoaster years of delays, committees, two ballots, misinformation and lawsuits.



In six months of compromise, the Task Force came to the same conclusions as the original Streams Committee. The unanimous report called for an advisory ballot to get the public's input on how to finance the Utility.

The more basic question of whether the voters wanted comprehensive drainage control at all was not an alternative on the ballot. According to legal advisors, by establishing the Utility, the City had formally acknowledged government's responsibility to alleviate the problem. Canceling the Utility would not automatically cancel the responsibility. The City might lose insurance and be liable for damages from stormwater runoff.

This as-yet-untested legal question haunted the decision-making process throughout. The reluctance to put a "no action" alternative before the public had the effect of short-circuiting the public participation process.

*"City Hall knows the people will never approve of it,
so they're going to figure out a way to do it anyway."*

VOTE Leader

FIRST ADVISORY BALLOT

The two choices presented to the public were whether to finance the Utility through the general fund (within the existing organizational framework) or the service charge (based on amount of impervious surface on all property).

Citizen activists organized campaigns for both alternatives. In November 1975, the general fund alternative won by a slim margin. This was interpreted by some as the public saying "No" to the Utility and "Don't try to put anything over on us" to the Council.

However, the City Council did not change the Utility's method of funding. Instead, it appointed a 15-member Storm and Surface Water Management Advisory Committee. Its charge:

1. To recommend alternative levels of service, service priorities and funding sources.
2. To review the proposed multi-million dollar capital improvement program and method of funding.

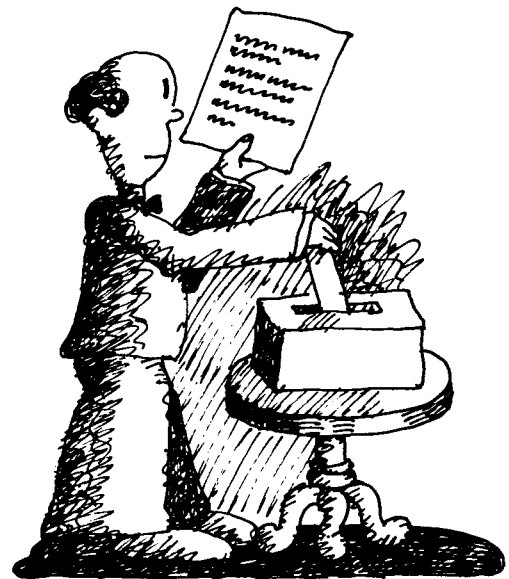
The mayor promised that if the recommendation required more money than was available under the general fund, the City would put together a total package and present it to the voters once again.

The Advisory Committee met for seven months and came to the same conclusions as the first two—storm drainage control is a significant issue that merits a separate department and a steady and sure source of funds as much removed from political considerations and battles over priorities as possible.

The Advisory Committee recommended the Utility and service charge funding as the best solution for Bellevue's needs. In doing so, it turned its back on the voice of the majority as expressed in the advisory ballot.

*"I've been a victim of the Great American Fraud...
teachings that we have a democracy and you can have citizen
input and then have results on the other end of the tunnel.
As soon as the citizens start competing with what the bureaucrats
want, the desires of the people go out the window."*

VOTE Leader



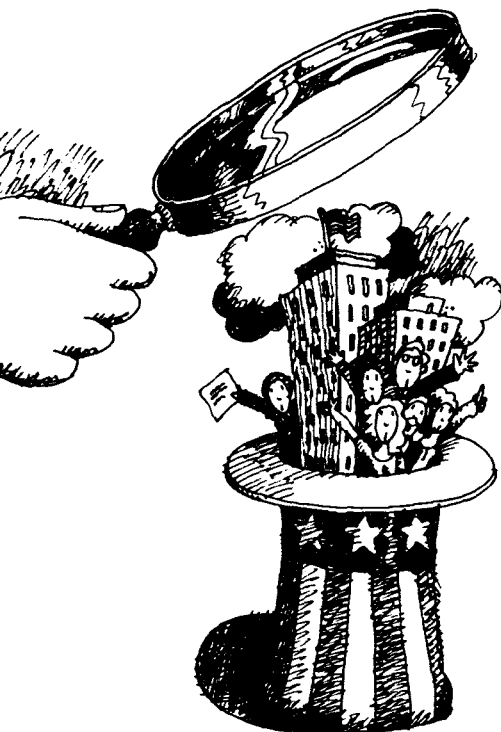
ANOTHER BALLOT

The Advisory Committee formulated a ballot to put the question of funding before the voters again. The alternatives were almost identical to

the first advisory ballot a year ago. But this one more clearly spelled out the real costs of storm drainage control.

Some committee members felt that voter awareness and political acceptability of their conclusions were two hurdles still to be overcome toward gaining approval of the Utility concept. But no public education campaign had been carried on during the committee's deliberations. However, just before the advisory ballot, publicity increased substantially. This, along with presentations and doorbelling campaigns, brought the issue to the public more clearly and meaningfully than at any time in the previous seven years. In 1976, the voters gave a decisive victory to the service charge alternative. A citizen's commission was appointed to advise on Utility policy and "to provide... tighter citizen control of all aspects of storm-water management." This commission has an ongoing monitoring function.

The story continues today with a small group of the opposition planning to test the legality of the Utility in court. And when the Utility reinstated its billing in the summer of 1977, angry citizens called demanding to know "what this is all about." But it's nothing compared to the earlier eruption which effectively derailed a model plan for years and became the worst crisis of confidence in Bellevue's history.



"I personally believe Bellevue's a success story in that they came against a problem and, while at any one time there were people going in different directions, wondering why they were even in this program at all, they did persevere. They didn't back down from what they set out to do.

And it's a success because it was followed through for the time it's going to take. So many people expect a piece of legislation to be up and running in two years and if it's not, they feel disappointed and the impetus is dropped. But Bellevue stayed with it. Bellevue went all the way."

208 Program Manager, Municipality of Metropolitan Seattle (METRO)

BELLEVUE IN RETROSPECT

Public participation's history in this country is as old as the government. Today, incorporating the citizen voice into the planning process is a tricky jigsaw puzzle of technical, complex decisions and numerous publics.

Elected officials and planners have the seemingly impossible task of building a lasting, involved constituency in a fluid, constantly changing atmosphere in which citizens usually react, rather than anticipate. Planners and officials must attract people's attention over and over again in order to ask them what they need and want. And, perhaps most important, while they have the people's attention, they must say, "We hear you. We recognize the validity of your concerns. Let's work out a solution together before a decision is made." The result usually is credibility and support for the final plan.

There's no sure formula for success and it costs time, effort, commitment and money. But, as Bellevue discovered, not seeking public input is a risk.

The Bellevue decision-makers sincerely thought they had done their best to include and inform the public. Two major factors made it difficult to predict the intense public reaction:

1. On the national scene, Watergate and inflation contributed to an uproar out of proportion to the mistake of the double billing; and the Utility became the focal point for citizens' generalized complaints about government.
2. The potential legal responsibility for stormwater control had the effect of keeping a "no action" alternative off the ballot, and infuriating the opponents.

From a public participation viewpoint, the major deficiency in Bellevue's experience is that it did not have an ongoing, organized citizen involvement effort. Instead, it was on a crisis-by-crisis basis with no overall direction or responsibility for carrying it out. There was no monitoring to insure that public support was building, no overall strategy and no attempt to analyze the effectiveness of the process. Was the public informed? Was the public supportive? Was the public being listened to and responded to? If not, why not?

Despite this, there was a great deal of participation in Bellevue. Citizen committees spent years studying problems and drafting ordinances and ballots. Opponents effectively organized and circulated petitions. Voters attended meetings and hearings, went on educational tours of the streams and made their views known through two advisory ballots. Media (news articles, letters-to-the-editor, brochures, slide presentations, radio and TV coverage) aided the communication process between government and people. The entire storm drainage question was opened to intense public scrutiny, especially after the double billing. A compromise was hammered out that satisfied both government and community.

EFFECTIVE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Each situation is so different that a blueprint for public participation has to be devised for each project. But there are basic components of the process that can be examined in light of Bellevue's experience.

CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Awareness—Both the government and the public need to accept the value of long-range planning for far-sighted solutions. Raising the awareness of people so they understand the future implications of each problem takes time. In Bellevue, the committee members were convinced of the need for planning, but did not convey this to the public in an understandable way.

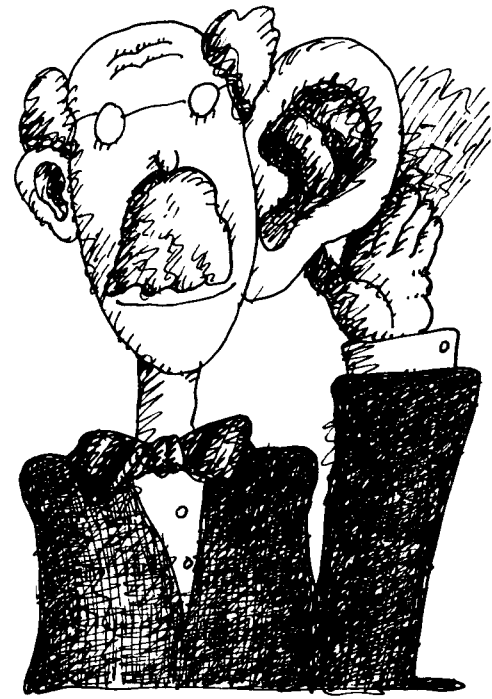
Government Commitment to the Planning Process—Citizens must feel that elected officials value their input and take it seriously. They also need feedback on how their ideas are being used. The City Council did listen to the Streams Committee's plan and signed it into law. When the public protested, the Council stopped the Utility's work except on a minimal level. The anti-Utility sentiment of the first advisory ballot was heard but, seemingly, not heeded.

Belief in a Real Problem—People must believe that a real problem exists that is personally relevant to them. Most of the public information centered around the technical aspects of the Utility and the rate structures. An information campaign emphasizing the significance of the problem to each person, as well as showing that everyone had a stake in the solution would have paved the way for factual information later. It's difficult because drainage can be a dull subject with long-range aspects rather than current critical needs.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS

Ideal public participation usually follows a pattern of open and accessible education, alternative selection and action (legislative or otherwise).

Open—Bellevue's deliberations throughout were always accessible to the public.



Education—Mutual education occurs as planners and officials learn about community needs, concerns and values, and citizens become informed about technical details. In Bellevue, committee members and City Hall educated each other well. But they did not effectively educate the public at the same time. Contributing factors were confusion over whose responsibility it was to educate and public apathy about the subject of stormwater drainage.

Alternative Selection—As many diverse views as possible must be solicited, considered and refined through a continuous dialogue with both supporters and skeptics. This avoids future suspicions about whose interests are being served and produces a satisfactory plan. All options were considered in the beginning of the Streams Committee work. But the public was not actively included in the alternative selection process as the Streams Committee eliminated unworkable options. Though the meetings were open and there was news coverage, some opponents labeled the committee as a special interest group because many of them live on streams.

Action—To the average Bellevue citizen, it appeared that the action stage came at the beginning of the process rather than at the end. Their interest was not stimulated until *after* the legislation created the Utility. When the Task Force was formed to restudy the problem, the public felt that it didn't really go back to the beginning because a "no action" alternative was not allowed consideration.

STRATEGIES

Of the many tactics for encouraging public participation, three were especially important in Bellevue: use of media, timing and constituency building.

Use of Media—Media coverage is critical in each phase of planning for maintaining a dialogue between the planners and the public and as a barometer of public opinion. In Bellevue, television and radio were used very little. During the controversy, the newspaper covered it extensively and assisted the VOTE group to coalesce by actually putting them in touch with each other. Before the second advisory ballot in 1976, the newspaper provided an objective forum for discussion.

Timing—Citizen involvement activities should be planned to run concurrently with the technical side of program development and the two should be well integrated. Since Bellevue lacked an overall participation plan, it was difficult to time activities for maximum effectiveness. Timing of publicity was also off. For example, there was a seven-month lag between public information about the double billing and the bill in the mailbox. A flyer had been included with the previous bill, but the double bill arrived with no accompanying explanation.

Constituency Building—Planners must constantly be aware of the necessity for building a constituency of supporters for the plan as it is being developed. If the public participation process is well carried out and all viewpoints have been considered, this constituency confirms the validity of the plan and smooths the way for implementation. To accomplish this it is important to identify potential supporters and opponents and involve them at the beginning. The supporters aid in leading the program and informing the public while the opponents raise issues that help refine the plan. Community leaders, business interests, service clubs and all institutionalized segments of the community should be brought into the process either through direct involvement or through information campaigns.

In Bellevue, several community leaders were actively involved. They had such a large task in understanding the technical information that they ended up working in a vacuum created by time constraints, public ignorance, apathy and their own assumptions that the base of support was already out there.

The opponents were not identified and involved in the beginning. In this case, it may have been impossible to predict who they would be. A natural opponent, the developers, did not choose to be involved at all. After their successful petition drive, VOTE members were included on all the committees. This was instrumental in winning most of them over to the idea that Bellevue's need for a comprehensive stormwater management system was best served by a Utility and funded by a service charge on all property.

*"I don't necessarily like it, but I've been
involved in it and I can live with it."*

Committee member

What was the effect of this experience on Bellevue? The city has a model utility, a unique approach to the problem of storm drainage. The citizens preserved the streams and gained a closer relationship with City Council and staff. And city government learned to listen to—and constructively utilize—the voices of the people.

*"An entirely different climate prevails down at City Hall.
They're listening. Sometimes I don't think they like
what they hear, but they're listening."*

Committee Member

For a detailed case study, see "The Bellevue Experience,
a study of social Political and Environmental Action,"
by Hall & Corwin Associates for the Municipality of
Metropolitan Seattle. (METRO). November, 1976.