

# **From Citizen Expression to Engagement and Empowerment: The case of Olympia, Washington**

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Two calendars by local artists hang in my house—one by Stella Marrs and another by Nikki McClure. Marrs's artwork is done in a 1950s style and often boasts feminist statements along side pictures of doting wives in knee-length dresses and aprons. Her current calendar, *Democracy Meow*, features pictures of cats and political statements. One month's artwork shows a picture of a cat with a wide-open mouth and the statement, "The job of a good citizen is to keep her mouth open."

McClure's art contrasts with Marrs's witty work in that it is more calming and organic. McClure uses an x-acto knife to create intricate, two-dimensional paper cutouts. Her 2004 calendar is called *Onward! A Toolkit for Humanity*. Words and phrases like *sustain*, *process*, *take action*, *VOTE!* and *examine the food chain* remind us each month of our human and democratic responsibilities.

These expressionistic Olympia residents, as well as others, have attracted widespread acclaim. In 2000, the band Sleater-Kinney and others in Olympia's alternative music scene were profiled in a *Time* article that referred to Olympia as the "hippest town in the West." In 2003, Olympia resident Rachel Corrie received attention throughout the world after she was killed protesting Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip. And *Seventeen Magazine* recently made a trip to The Evergreen State College's campus to profile the students' style of body piercings and tattoos among other fashion statements (Pemberton, 2004).

Olympia is a small city (population 43,040) located at the southern most point of the Puget Sound. It is also, and more generally known as, the capitol of the Evergreen State. Situated between Seattle and Portland, Olympia is the seat of Thurston County (population 218,500) (Thurston Regional Planning Council, 2004).

Using a collection of interviews and articles, this paper explores Olympia's strong tradition of citizen expression and how that leads to engagement and empowerment in governance. Olympia residents routinely use their art and voice to convey an array of messages. Whereas some of the City of Olympia's governing techniques are traditional (public hearings, advisory councils, etc.), they have made great strides to employ a variety of more innovative methods. A case study of this community reveals two interesting findings: (1) Olympia citizens form strong associations that affect the governing process; and (2) City Council members and administrators host innovative forums to achieve better discussion and greater public involvement. Thus, a closer look at the activities in this small urban community suggest that a relationship does exist between expression, engagement and empowerment.

### ***The Three 'E's***

Expression means to convey, through words, art, music, or movement, a manifestation. Thus, expression is a tool that can be used by anyone who draws on creativity to make a statement or point. At times, expression may be directed toward public administrators or representatives.

Engagement is different than expression in that it is a tool one uses to solicit others' involvement. Engagement means to draw into; involve. Empowerment, which means to invest with authority, is fundamentally different than expression and engagement because it is a tool used by those with "power." Within the realm of governance, both engagement and empowerment relate to the way in which an administrator or representative solicits involvement from citizens.

Stivers (1994) explains the differences between a responsible and a responsive administrator. She describes the "responsible bureaucrat" as a "proactive agent, one who causes things to happen, in charge of his or her own conduct, trustworthy, capable of moral judgment, reliable." On the other hand, the "responsive bureaucrat" is described as "reactive, sympathetic, sensitive, and capable of feeling or suffering." The responsible bureaucrat, used to being in control, may struggle to truly engage and empower citizens; while a responsive bureaucrat, one who embraces listening, justice and open-mindedness, may be more likely to employ these tools.

Certain governance practices empower and engage citizens more than others. Unfortunately, some of the most widespread and commonly used practices are not conducive to citizen engagement and empowerment. King et al (1998) explain that in order to achieve an effective and satisfying participation process traditional relationships between administrators and citizens must be rethought and roles must be re-evaluated. Data collected from focus groups showed that many traditional techniques used, such as public hearings, citizen advisory councils, panels and surveys, are not effective tools for soliciting citizen participation.

It is logical that if citizens routinely express a manifestation, then they are more likely to become engaged in governance. Studies show that people who regularly attend church volunteer more than others and those who are involved in formal associations are more likely to be philanthropic (Putnam, 2000). Members of the Community Service Movement argue that children who participate in community service are more likely to be engaged adults (National Academy of Public Administration, 2003). Thus, engagement is a learned behavior that develops over time and with practice. It is a behavior that must be cultivated, particularly by public administrators.

It is also logical that routine citizen engagement may lead to greater empowerment. King et al (1998) argue, "If administrators change their practices and start working with citizens as partners, they will begin to shift the way administration is practiced at the microlevel." These microlevel changes will then lead to overall changes in governance structure and practices. Provided a community fosters citizen engagement, public administrators and elected officials will likely become more familiar and comfortable with the concept of empowerment and begin shifting authority to citizens. Furthermore, citizens are likely to have a greater expectation to be empowered.

### ***A Unique Community***

There are several factors that contribute to Olympia's uniqueness: state government, The Evergreen State College, and a generally strong activist community.

Unlike many other communities, bureaucrats comprise a large portion of the citizen base in both Olympia and Thurston County. The Washington State Employment Security Department

(2004) reports that 38.7 percent of the county's non-agricultural employment is with the public sector. The large force of government employees helps keep the local economy stable. Cathie Butler, the City of Olympia's communications manager, says the local population has a high level of education, is Internet savvy and reads the local newspaper. She shares that a recent random sample telephone survey of Olympia residents conducted by Elway Research, Inc. of Seattle for the City of Olympia reflects that 8 in 10 respondents pay attention to local government issues; 7 in 10 had watched a City Council meeting on TV; and more than 8 in 10 have Internet access at home.

The Evergreen State College, established in late 1960s, is a non-traditional and progressive liberal arts school. The school annually brings 4,000 students to the area to access a student-centered learning model of innovative interdisciplinary courses. Student activism is a core value on campus. For instance, in the 1980s students put pressure on the administration to end business with firms that had ties with South Africa and more recently organized an initiative to require the school to purchase green energy. Garbage cans on campus aren't identified simply as "trash" but also "landfill."

Activism in Olympia originates from three areas. First, organized rallies bring people from around the state to Olympia, especially when the legislature is in session. Dick Cushing, the City of Olympia's former city manager and adjunct faculty at Evergreen, says the state capitol is a focal point for groups to gain visibility for a wide range of interests. Second, as was just mentioned, members of the Evergreen community organize to influence a myriad of issues.

Third, and most significantly, members of the general population routinely organize to express their views. On Saturday, November 6, 2004 *The Olympian's* local section highlighted two activist groups. Women in Black is a group of women who gather in silence every Friday night for one hour dressed entirely in black. The group has gathered since fall of 2002; sometimes it is small with few participants, other times women stand shoulder to shoulder to span an entire block (Woodward, 2004). The Olympia Movement for Justice and Peace is another very active group. On this particular day they received attention for their opposition to the war in Iraq in light of Bush's reelection (Neumeyer, 2004).

### ***Engagement and Empowerment through Associations***

On his journey to the United States in 1831, Alexis de Toqueville could have easily visited present-day Olympia to form the opinion that Americans like to create associations. In *Democracy in America*, de Toqueville writes,

Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of dispositions are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types—religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute. Americans combine to give fêtes, found seminaries, build churches, distribute books, and send missionaries to the antipodes. (de Tocqueville in Payton, 1998, p. 12).

Nonprofit organizations provide the opportunity for community members to join forces and gain a unified voice in government (Steuerle and Hodgkinson, 1999). Strong and innovative

nonprofit organizations and grassroots associations in Olympia tackle issues such as access to health care, organic and sustainable gardening, and much more.

Ingrid Renan Clark has been an Olympia resident for eight years. She moved to Olympia to attend Evergreen and obtain a degree in performing arts. She's the mother of a one-year old and remains active with the local independent film society and the alternative music scene. "The engagement in this community is grassroots—in the music fests, Procession of the Species, anti-war protests," she says. "These are the groups that make Olympia the hippest town in the West—they're underground."

Butler echoes the significant contributions of grassroots initiatives. She points out that one of the community's unique qualities is that there isn't a single large corporate presence. "People can't look to money from one core power to solve problems," she says. "Here it takes grassroots, creativity, and commitment from the community to foster action." She refers to an article she recently read in the local paper. Capitalizing on the fact that many Olympia residents are active outdoors, concerned community members publicized a drive to collect used backpacks to give to the transient population to carry their belongings.

City of Olympia public administrators and City Council members are quick to recognize the good work of local associations and collaborate. One unique partnership between the City, Arts Commission and downtown businesses is Art Walk, a semi-annual event that takes place in downtown Olympia. Every spring and fall the core of downtown streets closes and shops stay open late to display local artwork. Thousands of people wander the streets, stepping in and out of stores. Sounds of punk rock, jazz and blue grass music fill the air. Some street performers juggle bowling pins and pass out balloons, while others dressed as sport utility vehicles shout messages promoting fuel efficiency. "It's a great event," says Cushing. "It brings together so many groups and individuals to celebrate the arts and enhances the vitality of our downtown. It's a real collaboration."

Procession of the Species coincides with the spring Art Walk. The Procession, put simply, is a parade of species belonging to the earth, air, water and fire. The community engagement around this event is significantly more than a typical parade. The Procession's mission is: "Created by the community for the community, the Procession of the Species is an artistic and environmental celebration using the mediums of art, music, and dance to inspire learning and appreciation of the natural world within the urban setting" (Khanna, 2004). To increase community engagement the event planners occupy a vacant elementary school. The community is welcomed to this space to create costumes with recycled products. In this shared area participants create their own masterpieces among a life size giraffe, masks of coyotes, and banners of water and fire. "Procession of the Species and Art Walk are incredible," says Clark. "These things bring the community together like nothing else."

Recognizing that Olympia is not a lone entity, public servants from surrounding municipalities and Thurston County work closely to address local needs. "What works most effectively is partnership and collaboration," says Cathy Wolfe, Thurston County Commissioner. She explains that the interaction between government, nonprofit and private organizations is unique in this community. "It used to be that different groups worked more independently to get funding. Now there's a tendency to work collaboratively. I see a lot fewer turf issues, and more people and organizations working together to solve problems."

Commissioner Wolfe specifically mentions the Feed the Hungry Partnership. This was an ad-hoc committee created in response to the closing of a downtown feeding-site for the homeless. "While government participated in the effort, the Feed the Hungry Partnership really empowered service providers to solve the problem themselves," she says. "We were there to support them and serve as facilitators, but they came up with the solutions." The Feed the Hungry Partnership started as the result of an all-day summit hosted by the local food bank. Two nonprofit leaders were chosen to spearhead the committee. The group, which included downtown business owners, elected officials, service providers, as well as other concerned citizens, met for a year to collaboratively develop a successful feeding site.

Through formal associations Olympia's expressive citizens gain a stronger voice in governance. Citizens, public administrators and elected officials collaborate to improve community conditions whether it's to enhance the arts or improve social and health services. In this arena, citizen expression has effectively led to greater engagement. Further, public administrators and elected officials appeal to citizens to collaboratively solve problems and make improvements in the shared community.

### ***Innovations in Governance***

Stivers (1994) states that bureaucrats must develop enhanced listening skills to be effective leaders. She writes that a "listening bureaucrat" will consider herself or himself a facilitator of community discussions. The Olympia City Council has hosted episodic forums and meetings that move away from traditional citizen input processes. These opportunities allow Council members to really hear meaningful citizen insights.

On several occasions the City has hosted open forums called "Community Conversations." This type of forum is a structured outreach effort where community members are invited to discuss three to four specific questions related to a single topic. People are divided into small groups with representation from different stakeholders and the general public. Participants sit in a circle and engage in active discussion and provide feedback to the City around a key topic of interest or concern. "Our goal with the Community Conversation is to gather information and data about a current and sometimes controversial issue," says Cushing. "This is the most expansive type of public involvement. These things can be terrifically energizing for the public, the staff and council."

In February 2002, City officials felt they needed to bring the community together to discuss concerns about downtown safety in light of citizen complaints about a large transient population and perceptions related to safety. Rather than make decisions based on anecdotal information, Council members hosted the forum to hear the community's feedback on three key questions about public safety and downtown viability. To ensure the event was accessible to all stakeholders it was held at a local high school in the evening and free bus service was offered to shuttle people to the site. More than 300 Olympia area residents attended the Conversation, including about 30 individuals who indicated they were homeless members of the community. Following the Conversation, a grass roots group called Common Ground self-formed to assist the City and downtown officials in shaping and implementing solutions.

One of the City Council's current goals is to create a more open and responsive government. In addition to archiving Council member emails as public documents and providing

online access to agenda packets, among other initiatives, the Council hosted two new non-traditional meetings this past year to solicit citizen discussion and feedback. The first was a series of interactive budget-planning forums held in the spring of 2004 at various locations, including a senior citizen residence center and a high school. Anticipating a budget shortfall, the City Council asked residents for input on what to cut and what to keep. Residents recorded their responses to a series of questions on a hand-held computer keypad. Results were instantly tabulated and graphically shared with the audience in Power Point format. Input was recorded and the Council later used the feedback when determining the budget.

The second forum was a Town Hall Meeting hosted by the City Council in January 2005. The meeting, held on a Tuesday evening, attracted 200 Olympia residents and stakeholders who joined Council members for pizza and sandwiches, then sat down for a discussion of the City's priorities. Attendees were divided into seven groups of 25 to 30 people each. Each group, facilitated by a Council member and assisted by a City staff member, developed its own discussion agenda. Formal reports about the discussion in each group were presented to the City Council at a televised meeting in mid-January. Information collected at this meeting will be used at a retreat to discuss goals for the coming year.

The City of Olympia's community engagement processes are laudable. City administrators and Council members have taken significant steps toward enhancing citizen involvement. These forums and meetings demonstrate innovative activities to engage citizens in governance.

## **Conclusion**

This Olympia case study helps support the concept that citizen expression can lead to greater engagement and empowerment in governance. However, the evolution from expression to empowerment takes consistent work and one cannot expect to find engagement and empowerment in every community where there is abundant citizen expression.

Two findings about the relationship between expression, engagement and empowerment were discovered. First, one of the most effective ways citizens achieve a voice in government is through associations. Olympia has a vibrant community of nonprofit and grassroots organizations. General citizens as well as public administrators and City Council members sit on Boards, volunteer, and support these organizations in a variety of ways. Through formal associations citizens create a venue by which they become engaged and empowered. Because Olympia administrators and Council members support the efforts of these organizations, there is collaboration around issues of importance and concern.

The second finding is that City Council members and public administrators are taking steps in the right direction to encourage greater citizen involvement. The City's open government initiative and recent forums use innovative citizen engagement practices. These focused activities cultivate healthy discussions where Council members and administrators become responsive bureaucrats and truly listen. These new practices are important for citizen engagement and it will be interesting to watch as the Council and public administrators continue to implement additional engagement and empowerment techniques in the future.

Files about the Community Conversation and the Town Hall Meeting are posted on the City of Olympia's website: <http://www.ci.olympia.wa.us>

## About the Author

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