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The Best of Times, The Worst of Times: Antecedents for and Effectiveness of Community Engagement in Two Small Rural Towns

Liza Pulsipher Wilson and Nick Sanyal

Abstract

Communities in transition face traumatic change and seek to diversify their economies while continuing to maintain their ties to landscapes that define their heritage. This qualitative case study provides an understanding of community engagement in two transitional towns. Both communities are equally positive about the role of community engagement, but clear differences in the nature and effectiveness of community engagement between the two emerged. The citizens of one town consider their community to have navigated the waters of change. They emulate a bridging community—a diverse group of people with divergent ideas who look outward and toward the future. The second town is still trying to become a place of which residents are proud. They are hindered by the absence of an inspiring leader, the lack of vision, and an inability to communicate between disparate groups. They exemplify a bonding community, where a majority of the citizens have similar mindsets and focus inward.

The Challenges Facing Rural Communities in Transition

Forces of nature and years of reliance on the extractive natural resource industries such as forestry, agriculture, and mining have shaped rural communities in the Pacific Northwest. With the waning of these extractive industries, small rural communities face a common set of challenges that complicates their ability to make sound decisions leading to a more sustainable future. They face a rapidly changing and declining economic base, the loss of their youth who leave to seek better employment elsewhere, and fluctuating markets for agriculture and natural resource products (Parker, Wulfhorst, & Kamm, 2002).

In September 2007, as part of a service-learning commitment, we invited ourselves into Dayton, Washington, to learn about and help facilitate community engagement. The community was welcoming and receptive to our ideas. Their ability to work together and their vision and strong sense of community and identity led to our multi-year presence. Hundreds turned out for our workshops. Many of the ideas we helped generate were adopted as recommendations for potential economic development opportunities for the community.

In the fall of 2009, we began a project in Priest River, Idaho. This time we were contracted to help with a variety of planning projects, including enhancing the ability of the community to engage in developing their own future. We facilitated workshops to determine the current level of community engagement and to stimulate community development ideas. While many

residents were welcoming and somewhat receptive to our involvement, their lack of ability to work together and “confused identity” resulted in arrested development as most of the ideas generated by residents were viewed with suspicion by others in the community. Our four workshops had a cumulative attendance of fewer than 50 people.

This paper reports on what the residents of these two communities believe transpired and shares their understanding of why their towns reacted the way they did.

Theory and Practice of Community Engagement

While the many theoretical concepts inherent in community engagement and development derive from a very diverse range of disciplines including sociology, psychology, medicine, anthropology, and political science, the theoretical influences for our research draws from a framework of community participation and community empowerment literature that guided our selection of respondents, helped establish the substantive frame for our semi-structured interview questions, and helped structure our analysis by suggesting a coding structure. Our choice of the theories that informed our work was based on several considerations. First, they were largely developed by and for practitioners and because they were practice based, we felt they would be most applicable to the small rural towns we were working in. Second, they all explicitly suggested questions that we could use in our substantive frame.

Community engagement. Social ecology theories of community engagement recognize it as the

coordinated commitment of community at multiple levels:

- (1) individuals;
- (2) social network and support systems;
- (3) organizations that serve and influence individuals and the rules and regulations that these organizations apply;
- (4) the community, including relationships among organizations, institutions, and informal networks; and
- (5) public policy, regulations, ordinances and laws at the state and national levels (Goodman, Wandersman, Chinman, Imm, & Morrissey, 1996, p. 35).

Community participation. When citizens participate in community development, they build social networks and social capital that strengthens ties among individuals and groups/organizations, leading to a higher level of concern for their place and a more positive perception of their environment.

High levels of community involvement and development increase awareness in a community by making knowledge accessible to citizens, and also, as Agyeman and Angus (2003) note, “move the focus from the ‘rights’ of a citizen to participate in policy making, to the ‘responsibilities’ that a citizen has within his or her community” (p. 361). By framing problems through a lens of civic engagement, community members are more likely to support and act on change.

Community empowerment. Central to community engagement is empowerment—mobilizing and organizing individuals, community organizations, and institutions and enabling them to influence the direction and nature of decisions. Empowerment occurs at three levels: individual, group or organizational, and the community (Rich, Edlestein, Hallman, & Wandersman, 1995). Empowerment at one level can influence empowerment at the other levels (Fawcett, Paine-Andrews, Francisco, Schultz, Richter, Lewis, Williams, Harris, Berkley, Fisher, & Lopez 1995).

Community empowerment (i.e., the capacity of a community to react effectively to shared issues) occurs when individuals and institutions have adequate authority to reach the outcomes they seek (Rich, et al., 1995). Individuals and organizations direct power and influence by being informed about issues through a civic “process of accumulating and evaluating evidence and information,” and empowerment involves “the ability to reach decisions that solve problems or produce desired outcomes,” requiring that citizens and institutions

work together to reach and implement decisions (Rich et al., 1995, p. 669).

Study Objectives

This qualitative case study (Yin, 2009) is an attempt to understand community engagement in Dayton and Priest River through a constructivist lens, specifically:

1. What are the antecedent conditions that facilitate successful community engagement?
2. Why did one community succeed while the other was unwilling to create and act on their own visions for the future?

Limitations

This study examines two communities at a single point in time and is not intended to be representative of all similar communities. Our intent is not to imply right or wrong; rather it is to seek what has or has not worked for the communities and to draw connections from those commonalities or differences. The information reflects the residents’ and stakeholders’ views of themselves and the themes that emerged from our conversations with them.

Procedures

Interviews. Primary data were collected through a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews that consisted of a series of open-ended questions that formed the a priori substantive frame for our inquiry (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). We used follow-up questions and prepared probes throughout the interview to ensure that we understood the responses as intended by the interviewee. Because of the rapport that both of us had developed with the respondents, we conducted each interview as a team. This provided the additional advantage of adding to the diversity of probing questions and aided coding and thematic interpretation.

Selection of respondents. We used a criterion-based approach to select respondents (Creswell, 1998). Our primary criterion was that the respondents had to be long-term residents who had participated in multiple community efforts, either as an organizer or member of a group, or as a formal observer over their time in the community. We used three other logical strategies to help select respondents and restrict the number of interviews we would have to conduct while still attaining saturation: critical case, politically important case, and typical case.

This diversity of selection strategies gave us a rich respondent pool that served as confirming and disconfirming cases, thus adding to the credibility and completeness of our data. We identified eight

people in Dayton and nine in Priest River who met our criteria and whose interviews allowed us to reach a saturation of ideas. These respondents represented five broad categories of people: elected officials (one in each town), journalist (one in each town), government employees (two in Dayton, one in Priest River), local commercial interests (one in each town), and community members at large (three in Dayton, five in Priest River).

Analysis. Interview transcripts were analyzed for content and meaning using open coding to organize participant comments for their overt content about the community and its engagement practices as presented in our substantive frame. A second coding further examined the data, identifying and applying sub codes to emergent themes and helped select exemplar quotes to illustrate the core nature of each theme. Exemplar quotes were independently selected by each of us to illustrate the key study findings. These quotes always represented the mid-point of the range of responses, with a conscious effort to avoid the extremes. A second consideration was to select quotes that could also help establish the context for the theme, thus adding to the authenticity of the findings. A final coding scheme organized the data into theoretically relevant categories to aid effective integration with the emergent explanations for the effectiveness of community engagement. This process cut across sub codes and respondents.

Our purpose is to describe and explain a complex civic and social process and provide practical advice and insight to the communities we worked with. Our work is not a test of a particular theoretical framework; nor are we working to strengthen any particular theory. Theory is used solely to create a systematic approach and to structure data capture, and analysis and interpretation to help remove bias and to maintain focus on the observations and experiences of our respondents.

Community Context

This section serves three purposes: to provide a basic introduction to the current socio-economic conditions in both towns, to provide a summary of important historical events that have influenced current issues there, and to briefly summarize our involvement in each town prior to our conducting formal interviews there.

Dayton, Washington, “The town that still believes,” is the county seat of Columbia County in southeast Washington. It is 868 square miles of a varied mix of landscapes and land uses including a wilderness area, national and state forest lands,

dry land and irrigated agriculture, a commercial ski area, and two river corridors. The county had approximately 4,040 residents in 2009, 2,000 of whom live in Dayton. A large proportion of residents are under 18 or over 45. The median age is 42.4 years, 52% of the population is female, and 95.6% of the population is white. Almost 83% of the population over the age of 25 has a high school education, and 17.5% a college degree. The median value of owner-occupied housing in 2009 was \$85,000 and the median household income was \$41,194 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

Dayton has been fighting for survival following the reduction in federal timber harvesting and the 2005 loss of the Seneca canning plant, once the world’s largest asparagus processing facility. The plant employed more than 1,000 seasonal workers and 50 full-time employees, and provided regional growers with more than \$15 million in annual revenues (Association of Washington Business, 2004). Residents created a downtown historic district funded by local taxes and formed three other historic districts encompassing the oldest functioning courthouse in Washington, the oldest school district, a historic train depot, and 146 other buildings on the National Registry of Historic Places. In 2009 the Port of Columbia County, the primary economic development organization for Dayton, instituted a 5-month long sustainability lectures series for the community through which residents could learn about and share ideas on community conservation, lifestyles, alternative agriculture, and other sustainability issues.

We held four community workshops that used a modified nominal group process (Delbecq, Van de Ven, & Gustafson, 1986) through which the residents could identify and share values they held about the community, threats to those values, and strategies to protect the values or prevent the threats from happening. Overall, residents identified a series of social and place-based values, and confirmed that they wanted to maintain their small-town rural atmosphere, maintain their agricultural lands and other working landscapes, continue building on their historic preservation, create a way to retain their youth through economic incentives, and grow their economy. They agreed they wanted to do this without allowing non-invested in-migration and over development or big box stores, and without losing their small-town feel or succumbing to outside pressures, all of which they saw as threats to long-held community values. The community was able to come up with a win-win situation when the concept of Blue Mountain Station was born,

an eco-industrial organic artisan foods processing industrial park, allowing them to utilize their agricultural heritage to produce locally grown food products, marketed as a “Dayton” brand.

Priest River, Idaho, “A progressive timber community,” is located in northern Idaho’s Bonner County and boasts a wide variety of landscapes and mixed land ownership, including state, national, and private forests. It sits at the confluence of two river corridors, the Pend Oreille and the Priest, and growth is restricted to US Highway 2 and State Highway 57 that intersect in town. In 2009 the population in Priest River was 1,754, many of whom live outside city limits because of the undeveloped rural landscape. The majority of the population is 45 years or older and the median age is 35.2 years. Over half of the population, 51%, is female, and 94.7% is white. Almost 78% of the population over 25 years of age has a high school education, and 6.1% has a college degree. The 2009 median household income was \$26,765 and the median value of owner-occupied housing was \$80,900. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

Priest River has its roots in the logging industry, with a minor emphasis on agriculture, mining, and tourism. The community has attempted to maintain its identity and create development. Since the closing of one of its biggest employers, JD Lumber, in 2008, the community has experienced high unemployment and a challenging outlook for the future.

During the early stages of our involvement, we used face-to-face and web-based surveys to collect resident’s values about Priest River. We also facilitated a series of four community workshops that revealed that residents valued the aesthetics of the town, their freedom, limited government, the location and geography, and the small-town rural feel. They felt that the possibility of excessive and irresponsible logging, overregulation, potential lack of access to recreation, and the prospect of replacing local businesses with chain restaurants and big box stores threatened their values, and that various strategies to mitigate those threats were needed, including more of the population participating in voting, preserving the heritage, and supporting local businesses. They also crafted a list of community engagement ideas that they would be willing to commit to participating in, including a town clean-up, a community

garden, music and art events, community and senior center activities, trail maintenance, and grants and fundraising.

FINDINGS

Our purpose in doing this study was to look at these two communities that share many key characteristics, yet differ in critical ways in how they engage citizens, to help us better understand the characteristics common to engaging citizens that other communities in transition could learn from. As Table 1 shows, both communities are equally positive about the need for community engagement, but clear differences in the nature and effectiveness of community engagement between the two emerge.

Dayton sees themselves as a community of empowered citizens who cooperate in very purposive ways. Priest River sees itself as a fragmented community whose citizens are only consulted for providing input and direction. This has resulted in the emergence of leaders and stakeholders in Dayton, who help design and implement desired actions. In contrast, Priest River has many strong stakeholder groups but lacks any strong unifying leaders to advance the cause.

This pattern is also discernible in how the two communities view politics; while both self-identified as being predominantly conservative, Dayton has been able to put aside politics to be more inclusive and work with a diversity of partners toward the common good. Priest River exhibits an adversarial style that is also manifest in how it views outsiders and newcomers.

Dayton has had many highly visible and successful community development projects and is aware that success is a powerful motivator for

Table 1. Summary of Meaning (Themes) Emerging from Initial Coding of Overt Responses about Community and Engagement Practices

DAYTON	Substantive Frame	PRIEST RIVER
Emergent Themes		Emergent Themes
Essential	Importance of community engagement	Very relevant
To empower people	Role of citizen engagement	To provide input and direction
Community has a purpose	Nature of community cooperation	Segments work well but not as a whole
A diversity of leaders and stakeholders	Source and style of leaders and stakeholders	Strong stakeholders
Transparent; conservatively independent but free-willed	Role and nature of local politics	Adversarial and conservative
Assimilated with reservation	Role of newcomers	Welcomed with suspicion
Always room for improvement	Strategies for enhanced engagement	NEEDED: Well-planned and well-executed communication
Interdependent	Nature of community cohesion	Independent
Living for the present and future	Role of history and heritage	Living in the present and the past
Positive appreciation	Opinions about outside experts	Limited appreciation

sustaining engagement. Much of the lack of progress in community development in Priest River is attributed by residents to the lack of communication between the many stakeholder groups and between city government and the community. A consequence of this is the observation by many in Dayton that they are an interdependent community, while Priest River prides itself in being independent. Dayton rallies around issues and events; Priest River commonly rallies around crises and traumatic events.

Finally, while Dayton is a town that is proud of its heritage (it has embarked on historic preservation and heritage tourism), it is a town that lives for the present and the future. It is “The town that still believes.” Priest River on the other hand is a town that is living in the present and the past. It is dogmatically holding on to its lumbering/logging heritage (“A progressive timber community”) although there is very little logging and lumbering activity remaining.

Explanations for Effectiveness of Community Engagement

Our second coding identified and applied sub codes to these emergent themes to help explain them. A final coding scheme grouped the themes into theoretically defensible categories to aid effective integration with our guiding theories. This cut across sub codes and respondents to *explain* the antecedents and effectiveness of community engagement.

Appreciative inquiry. Both communities agreed that community engagement is crucial to the success of their community. However, differences were very apparent. In Dayton interviewees generally spoke about their town in a positive way. They recognized their weaknesses, but their successes over the years gave them confidence in their ability to accomplish tasks and keep Dayton a place they were proud to call home. Priest River tended to respond from a more negative perspective, focusing on what they do not want, or do not want more of, rather than what they want more of.

Collaborative engagement: Cohesion and creating a critical mass. Community engagement is the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of affiliated people to address issues affecting the well being of their community (Fawcett et al., 1995). As one Dayton respondent pointed out,

It's a very engaged community; we have

an extremely high voter turn-out every election. When we've had town meetings and visioning sessions, and other things we always have a really good turnout, so I think people here really care about the community and I think they've seen where their involvement made a difference, so they are more willing to be involved.

Another had this to offer, “The good stuff you see here is because a lot of people have put a lot of hours into it.”

Dayton interviewees were readily able to identify many specific instances where their community had worked together, identified issues that the community either rallied around or were fragmented by, and were enthusiastic in citing details of these events. In Priest River such positive events were rarely mentioned, and there was little agreement on what these events and issues were.

The differences in how each community worked as collaborative, cohesive units were stark: The consensus from Dayton was that they work really well together. Each person and community group understood their roles within the community, and worked toward a common vision—making Dayton a better place to live. As one resident stated:

In this town...it's a nucleus of very successful people in the community.... Those people have the community's best interest at heart... and unless someone comes in with the influence to make change, that's the direction the community goes. They are well-minded people for the betterment and not to line their own pockets, or to inflate their own business success, or any of that. It's understanding that success of one, means the success of many.... These are people that are well connected within the community in terms of contacts, but also money, that they can facilitate change in a way this group kind of feels that's where they want to go.

Another added: “These people have a purpose, and the purpose is to make Dayton better, so once something is implemented, it's done and time to move on to the next thing.”

Priest River saw themselves as very much the opposite. They reported the existence of many different groups that work well by and for

themselves, but the community as a whole does not work very well together. They lack strong and accepted leaders and a strong collective vision for the future:

What you see there is small niches separately collaborating in groups. I mean small groups that are going in sometimes opposite directions and they're not collaborating, they're not working together because nobody has painted a larger picture of why you should, and that you can all get what you want.

Another shared this observation:

Priest River has a split and division in their vision, they are like gas particles at random, they're not coagulating very well. Segments of the community work together very well, but not together as a whole. [There's] not a lot of communication.

Communication, community participation, and creating a shared vision. When Dayton first started actively pursuing community engagement they realized that establishing and maintaining effective and purposive communication would be the key to their success. They developed a task force made up of a diverse cross-section of community leaders—business people, city officials, developers, civic leaders, institutional heads, and so forth. This group was tasked with prioritizing community needs and coordinating the activities of the various civic, volunteer and government groups operating in town. This helped ensure that groups were not competing or overlapping in their efforts. As one of these early leaders noted:

Engaged citizens share something in common; they share a vision, and when you have engaged citizens really there's nothing that can stop them. This community knows well, is a real example of engaged citizens coming together for whatever purpose. Our town it's been economic development primarily, they'll focus on something but it all kinda gears around this idea of making life better for the people who live there. Whether that's economy or recreation, or whatever.

Another noted:

I think we have good success with the local governments, right down to the Department of Transportation. I think it's because we have good community leaders that keep in contact; we have good projects that get completed and done well. The town, they always want to see that buy-in; they don't want me coming in and saying, 'Hey, this is what Dayton wants, let's do it'—the sense of community that's there.

Priest River also recognized that communication was perhaps their biggest barrier to success. They pointed out that they have many organizations in their community working towards the same goals, but not communicating with each other. They attributed this to the presence of strong personalities that often got in the way, "...trying to get that kind of coordination together because I see a lot of, we're not necessarily fighting each other, but we aren't working together and by doing that we are holding each other back."

Issue driven versus personality driven planning. The role of personality was especially noticeable in how each community initiated community development and planning. Dayton frequently mentioned that they are a very issue driven community and interpersonal relationships either move the community forward, or hinder its success, "...the thing about a small town is that if someone says something about you, it gets back to you, not just about your business, but about you personally."

Dayton is not without disagreement, however they tried to make it clear that they come together around issues, "...we work on one issue until it is solved, and then move on to the next set of projects." A key leader was more direct:

We don't whine, we don't get our feelings hurt, and when we get in disagreements, which we do, we don't whine. We just go on. In the beginning I noticed this, it took some growing up.

Priest River has a varied perspective on the nature and purpose of community engagement. On one hand they suffer from a lack of focus and vision,

I believe that our town needs a mission, and then with that comes goals, and a focus instead of this group doing this

and this group doing that and this group doing this, we have, you know where are we going, what's our future, where do we see ourselves? And until we have that vision and mission, you know we're just, you know, just doing things to do things, I guess.

Another reflected on the personalities of those who do involve themselves in the community: "There are a lot of second guessers in the community, and a lot a people with a piece of expertise but not the whole context or the responsibility for the decision." This desire to be involved, but without the requisite skills and direction has often led to "...participants trying to wear two or three hats and they don't know what hat really fits.

A second equally insidious consequence of the lack of vision in Priest River is a dominance on reactive thinking. For instance:

Like I said I think we are looking for excuses, even, and I know, I mean it's high unemployment and but I'm the type if you focus on the negative you will get negative. Puts the community people on a defensive posture, hard to get things accomplished.

One of the consequences of strong personalities thwarting process and success is the reluctance many in the community have to sharing their values,

They're probably the key to getting people to change. I guess they're probably one of the focal points of establishing a vision, is those values, and they started to come out a little bit with the SWOT [strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats] analysis that was done.... But it's one that people have a hard time sharing, because it's the person, and you have to have, I guess you might say, the leadership or people that are conducting your community visioning sessions and your groups and that type to be able to really pull that out of people and sometimes that takes inviting them to have a cup of coffee, to where they build the trust relationship and a feeling of really truly sharing their values.

Dayton, because of their reliance on vision-driven processes, recognized the need for having all the requisite elements coalesce to ensure successful engagement and development, "That supercharged citizenry, that has some basic skills in fundraising, grant writing, management—and then the vision, you gotta have those four pieces to make it come together."

Leaders versus stakeholders. Another big difference was the presence and nature of community leadership. This convergence of empowering leadership and an empowered populous was most true in Dayton: "It takes leaders, and those persons with passion.... The whole community is what supports Dayton."

Dayton interviewees were quick to identify leaders and showed excitement in naming names. They realized that these people didn't necessarily have "power"; yet they were able to mobilize people and get things done. "If you have the right leader you will have success." The list of leaders identified in Dayton included a dozen or so people and there was almost complete agreement across the interviews on who these people were, and why they were leaders:

We bring leaders of groups together.... A leader from the task force, and a leader from the county, and one from the city, and the hospital.... We all meet together and then we can say what we are doing, and we don't cross purposes, and we support one another.

In Priest River we received a very different response—near unanimous consent that while leaders could be found in the many different volunteer and civic groups, the community itself lacked an identifiable effective cadre of community leaders; "...(t)here's a lot of leaders within their own little organizations but there's really not leaders within the community."

People also had difficulty naming leaders or even deciding if they were leaders. Each person interviewed could name only about four or five people, and there was limited overlap between lists.

Community engagement in Priest River is not only impaired by a lack of effective community leaders, but by the presence of strong, unyielding "stakeholders" who could identify issues important to them, but who could not agree to work with those who had different (and not necessarily opposing) ideas. These stakeholders tended to

control the dialogue and stymie progress:

Negative [people] would tend to engage them more earnestly, and probably quicker, because they would be ready to fight anything that comes in, in most cases, especially if they are disgruntled about their community, which Priest River has a lot of that.

Challenges—dilution, help, and history.

Residents of both communities have noted an increase of the relocation of people from urban areas to their communities; however, their presence does not necessarily bolster the economy. As residents of both Dayton and Priest River have identified, they often lack an appreciation for the historic and social values the established residents have, but yet they have a stake in decisions that affect the community. Their higher incomes allow them to purchase land and build bigger homes, often leading to increased property values in the area. And often because they continue to commute to neighboring cities, their money is not always spent in the local community.

Both communities are self-identified bedroom communities, and believe an increasing percentage of residents are retirees and/or newcomers. However, in Dayton these are likely to be people who grew up there but who had moved away, returning to retire or start second careers. Priest River on the other hand is seeing an influx of people from out of state building large houses widely dispersed on the rural fringe that increasingly tax rural services.

The perception of newcomers in Dayton was predominantly positive: “A lot of the work that gets done here is done by non-natives; roughly half.” They realized the fresh perspectives, experience, and knowledge they bring to the community. As one person noted:

It’s welcome in my book, my goodness, we need fresh ideas and people; sometimes I want, we need a little broader vision, a little different perspective. Not better, just different.... We need newcomers, they serve on our boards, commissions.... A lot of them that come are young, retired, so they still have energy and want to do stuff, but they are not working so they have time to serve on the boards.

In Priest River the discourse was more varied. It acknowledged the fresh perspective and new ideas

that newcomers bring, while also recognizing that newcomers may have no effect on the community itself, and that they can be distrusted and have a hard time influencing change in the face of the entrenched inertia. As one resident said:

There’s a real chasm there, between newcomers and the people who are entrenched here.... People who come here from other places get frustrated with the entrenchment of the old guard and not being able to move anything along.

This also ties into the role and perception of outsiders. Outsiders are different from newcomers in that they do not stay in the community. They are planners, consultants, or university students brought in to work with the community. Dayton has worked with the University of Idaho and has hired several planners and consultants to assist with economic development in the past. Priest River has worked with universities and various community enhancement groups in recent years. In both communities, there was a strong positive perception of outsiders. Both realized that outsiders bring new and different experiences and ideas to the table, may instigate movement towards change, and may create beneficial partnerships. As one Dayton resident said, “It’s great, the more divergent ideas we get into the community the better. Different perspectives so you can see different opportunities that you might not see otherwise.”

Priest River was equally receptive to outside advisors:

Actually I think to me that it’s that outside influence that helps shift the thinking process. It’s particularly in the smaller communities where people don’t have the opportunity to really see the outside world. I mean when you spend all your life in the woods or at home you really don’t see that there are some other sides to things.

However, both communities also discussed potential limitations to the role of outsiders. Sometimes outsiders may not fully understand the situations that the communities face; they may bring in ideas that the community has tried to implement before, or their values may contradict the values of the community and therefore their ideas for change may not align with that of the

community. Because outside involvement is usually short-term they may not be trusted by the locals and even be perceived as threatening. When these conditions exist, outsider involvement may have a negative effect and breed apathy instead of improvement.

Dayton realized early on that they knew who they were and what they wanted to be, and therefore when an outsider comes in with new ideas the community decides if the ideas stick, "Like things to come, but we make the decision about what sticks." Another Dayton resident added, "...someone from the inside needs to step up, with a passion; people from the outside can help get things done."

Priest River often failed to benefit from these outside influences:

Everybody pays attention, gets it, and then we have a hard time moving forward.... I don't know if it's a lack of leadership, or too many cooks, the enthusiasm wanes, and you go back to your same, apathetic pattern.

One reason for this complacency may be that many small, rural communities are very tied to their history. Histories are a window to their identity, and also to a heritage that is dying out and taking that identity with them (McGranahan, 1994). Because the histories of these two communities were very different from each other in key ways (one being predominantly an agricultural town and the other a timber-dependent community), yet sharing other characteristics (loss of the major employer), we suspect that history and identity may influence their ability to embrace change and engage citizens. When we examined this topic we got mixed results.

In Dayton it was something that they had never really thought of, but they did realize that they were an agriculture town and that agriculture has provided a stable economic base over the years. Some speculated that farmers always have to plan ahead each season to ensure the best yields, and in this sense they may be more connected to a sense-of-place and willing to work to preserve that:

Between those...groups there might be [a difference].... Farmers have to deal with more of an annual production..., [planning] so far ahead of harvest to make sure they have a set income that's gonna help them pay those other bills and get them started on the next

crop.

Other views were equally illuminating:

That's our stable base and we have good farmers, I mean they are smart farmers. Our farmers are college educated; they're not just plowing fields, they are planning, they are using the best technology, they are making trial runs and testing. Some of them are leaders.

They identified agriculture as a part of Dayton's history and is still a part of their make-up; yet, they didn't necessarily identify with being an agricultural town now. They realized that their town has evolved over time:

Ag history has changed so much.... Farmers are usually pretty independent.... [They] are not on committees.... It's not a logging community, it's not even a farming community anymore 'cause there's no machinery sales here, truck sales, equipment sales.... It's an antique and art...kind of a cyclical movement.

Conversely, Priest River's identity and personality have been strongly influenced by the fact that they were a timber town, and they desperately want to be identified as one today. This is not a new discovery; past work described Priest River as having an extraction-based economy and identity and a "...community awareness as well as intent to keep that force alive as a part of who they are and plan to be" (Parker, Wulfhorst, & Kamm, 2002, p. 17). As one current resident confirmed:

It has been a very successful timber community over the course of time and it's ridden the highs and lows of the economy, and there's really been no need to change or to seek out change. I mean, every time it comes down to a low there's a little bit of an economic down push and as soon as the timber industry comes back up it fades away again and everything blows along very nicely.

Others saw value in the deep ties to a logging past, but worried about the entrenched thinking that may have come from that heritage,

Difficult for some to realize, at one time

5–6 mills employing people, now only a couple left so it's hard for some to understand/realize it will never be the same.... Yes, this is our history and it always will be. No one wants to step up and say where do we go next.

They offered no answer as to how being a timber town affects their success or ability in community engagement, except that it is a factor in their independent culture, which could be a hindrance to their success: "When you've had this lifestyle for thirty–forty years, you are patterned. To change that pattern creates anxiety."

This is not necessarily a bad thing; yet, it may limit the attainment of cohesive community engagement by "Hanging on to the notion of being a logging town, and that is hindering their progress." It also limited the vision that people had for their own growth, that "No matter how good kids did in school, they could always get a job at the saw mill."

What can your community do to create more community engagement? Most people in Dayton felt like they are doing everything they can to engage citizens, but acknowledged the importance of getting younger people involved and continuing to ensure they maintain good coordination between groups. They also stressed the need to continue making personal contacts:

When new people come in they find the part of the community involvement that suits them best...go for that part of a void where I felt that I could make a contribution and not have to be butting heads with somebody for silly things.

Another cautioned:

Communities tend to become complacent; the downtown was fixed up and pretty and just about every store front was full and things were going really well, and suddenly things have taken a turn for the worst, and I think sometimes people get complacent and don't realize they have to keep fighting, especially in a small community, you just have to keep fighting to survive.

More than one person indicated that citizens in Priest River only become engaged if there is a crisis. "If someone gets hurt, or sick, or a disaster

happens, the community steps up to provide for that person or family. Fundraisers become a way that Priest River engages citizens to help during a crisis."

Priest River was largely unable to point to new strategies for community engagement, preferring in large part to continue to dwell on the negative: "It's interesting to see who's at the meetings, but even more interesting to see who's not there."

Contributions to the Practice of Community Engagement

Throughout this project it became apparent that there are fundamental attributes that a community must have in order to survive the threats of the modern West. The first is the presence of a common vision that sets the tone for the direction a community will take and creates a filter through which ideas and alternatives can be examined and refined. Implementation of a vision will take long and short-term tasks; a community must then prioritize and assign immediate tasks to initiate momentum toward this vision.

Effective and purposive communication is another key characteristic. Communities consist of different sub-communities or groups composed of conflicting personalities, interests, likes, dislikes, and passions. It is imperative to have established avenues of communication in order to minimize competition and overlap and allow a common vision to emerge.

Leadership is a force that attracts people to be involved and motivates people to action. Communities must seek, recognize, and embrace their leaders. Leaders are often found in unexpected places and are not necessarily people with power; they must inspire trust, command respect, and have an innate sense of charisma to inspire and motivate the masses (Block, 2008).

Communities must have a forum for collaboration, such as town hall meetings, workshops, or seminars. In deciding how to facilitate collaboration, communities must discover what works best for them and also realize the context in which they should be working. Does the majority of the community turn out for town hall meetings, or is this form of engagement met with opposition? Is the community still in the visioning stages, or do they need to get together to solve an issue, discuss a plan for economic development, or just build community cohesion? For each of these tasks the setting for engagement may be different.

Finally, community leadership must consist of

a diverse group of individuals with different skill sets, training, and abilities. If the group is lacking in an area, for example if they are struggling with effectively facilitating community meetings, they should seek help from outside the community that can bring expertise, knowledge, and experience.

To most, Dayton is seen as a successful community; more importantly, citizens of Dayton see themselves as successful. They possess these fundamental characteristics and are able to maintain forward momentum in creating a place where they all want to live. They emulate what Putnam and Feldstein (2003) describe as a bridging community. They are a diverse group of people who have divergent ideas that look outward towards the future, but are able to converge around those ideas—based on their common vision—into purposeful actions for the present.

Priest River is still in the process of becoming a place current residents can be proud of; a lack of vision, the absence of an inspiring leader, and an inability of disparate groups to communicate between themselves hinder them. They exemplify what Putnam and Feldstein (2003) call a bonding community, meaning that a majority of the citizens have similar mindsets and focus inward rather than outward when approaching problems or addressing issues.

Putnam (2000) writes about these two distinct types of social capital: bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital is characterized by close ties among similar individuals or groups that afford support within the bonded group leading to strong within-group solidarity, which typically serves as barriers to relationships with groups outside the close-knit group. He describes bonding social capital as “inward looking and tends to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups” (p. 22). Bonding social capital tends to unite people who have similar resources.

Bridging social capital, representing the links between individuals or groups who differ from each other, is typical of communities, and is essential in communities that seek to do so. While these types of community links are usually not as strong as bonding social capital, they are more likely to be inclusive. Putnam (2000) also suggests that bridging social capital is essential to mobilizing community resources and acquiring and sharing a diversity of resource information. Bridging social capital is essential for acquiring social capital, but communities must have strategies for sustaining these heterogeneous relationships.

Small groups are better at forging and sustaining

bonding connections (Putnam & Feldstein, 2003), while larger groups offer critical mass, power, and diversity. Bridging makes communities larger by increasing the links between groups, not only inside a community but also with neighboring communities and institutions. Smaller groups are more parochial and protective. The key to success is to “...combine the advantages of small scale with the offsetting advantages of large scope” (Putnam & Feldstein 2003, p. 278). Granovetter (1973) supports this, noting that the strong ties between close and similar people and institutions are less valuable for advancement and growth than the weaker ties with distant but more powerful people and institutions. Finally, de Souza Briggs (1998) characterizes bonding social capital as being good for “getting by” and bridging capital for “getting ahead” (p. 11).

One proven solution to establishing bridging capital in a small community, and clearly seen in several of the community organizations in Dayton, is nesting several small groups within larger organizations. This results in people “weaving personal ties among the small groups and reinforcing their sense of identity with the larger group” (Putnam & Feldstein, 2003, p. 278).

The failure of many community engagement initiatives is often rooted in resistance to change. The equation below, created to illustrate the process for implementing change, can also be a formula for predicting successful community engagement:

$$\text{Change } f(D*V*FS*S) > RA$$

$$(*\text{Dissatisfaction } * \text{Vision } * \text{First Steps } * \text{Support}) >$$

$$\text{Resistance to Action}^1$$

The impetus for engaging communities begins with dissatisfaction (Table 2). Dayton and Priest River both experienced dissatisfaction in the form of catastrophic loss of industry and were propelled to change. Their differences, however, are found in the other elements of the equation. Priest River seems to foster a high resistance to action. This may be due to their strong identity with their history and their commitment to preserving that identity, or it could also be because of shared memories of past failures, as Bessaw, Gerke, Hamilton, & Pulsipher (2011) who also worked in the community, note: “...community members remembered previous failures and assumed failure. In the face of the obstacles, it was hard for us to garner support or have productive dialogue. Those who invited us

¹Mike Mercer, personal communication, April 5, 2010.

Table 2. Predicting Successful Community Engagement

Dissatisfaction	Vision	First Steps	Support	Resistance to Action
Dayton is a Community in Transition	Yes	Historical preservation Identifying leaders Projects with local unity Established communication networks	Leaders and stakeholders Created a task force Bridging between groups and agencies Projects of local utility Interdependence	Minimal
Priest River is a Community in Transition	No	Unity based on a crisis orientation Incremental change	Adversarial Independent	Strong, possessive stakeholders Bonding at the expense of bridging Holding on to history

didn't always show up to the meetings ” (p. 70). Because of this high resistance to action, the other pieces of the equation become much more difficult to calculate. They do not have or cannot agree on a strong vision for the future. They are reluctant to commit to first steps; and their independent nature hinders them from garnering support. Dayton has a lower resistance to action, as long as it falls in line with what they have been able to identify through a visioning process as compatible with community values. Consequently, this low resistance to action is fostered because they have a common vision and use it to filter future actions through. This also makes recognizing and accomplishing first steps and garnering support uncomplicated tasks.

Conclusions

Because of the complexity and ever-changing nature of rural towns there is not, nor could there ever be, a single unifying theory that underlies all of rural community engagement. As Cohen (2006) wryly notes, “All rural towns share one thing in common—they are all different” (p. 70). Three overlapping lines of theoretical and empirical thinking guided our study, and while theory generation was not a goal of ours, we feel we can offer some insights into what can help improve future theorizing about rural communities in change.

We believe that local context is a key construct in successful engagement. Because rural communities must actively seek new opportunities and mechanisms for economic growth if they are to survive, economic development must be designed to be compatible with local values and

visions. Local self-sufficiency must be emphasized over fast and convenient gains.

More important than community pride is the passion for an inclusive culture that can provide the foundation for a strong positive local attitude that can fuel a needed culture of innovation. Diversity should be celebrated and all people and all ideas should be welcomed. The history and heritage of a town can be the catalyst for change and success only if bridges are built among any isolated internal groups and to critical external partners. Sustaining a vision of the future requires believing in something as worth doing for the community and requires investing in infrastructure and people. By embracing context-based participatory approaches to community decision through collaboration and sharing of local resources, even opinionated leaders can appear to be working toward building consensus for the common vision.

While seeking outside help for community needs and when working with new people to help build community, leaders must always ensure that local values are protected. By finding ways to strategically inculcate new leaders, local bridging social capital can be invigorated. Supporting a presence of traditional community institutions connects community development with social activities. A rural community should be a self-reliant network and be constantly working toward creating a thriving community that believes that their destiny is in their own hands. Our work shows the debilitating consequences of the lack of a community vision. In effect, a vision is what helps define context in terms of local values, experiences, and needs. Such a context-based view

of community engagement sees the process as empowerment through an understanding of local inspiration and values rather than management by external indicators and measures, and our evidence suggests that it may be better at finding sustainable solutions that surmount the barriers of past history, personality, and territoriality and go beyond simply filling needs.

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