NAMING AND FRAMING LOCAL ISSUES FOR PUBLIC DELIBERATION

Let's suppose that things are not going the way you think they should in your community, city, county, or state. And you observe that elected officials and/or the appropriate government agencies are doing little to address your concerns. So you decide to contact others who you feel may also be concerned and ask them to come together to discuss the issue and decide on a course of action to pursue.

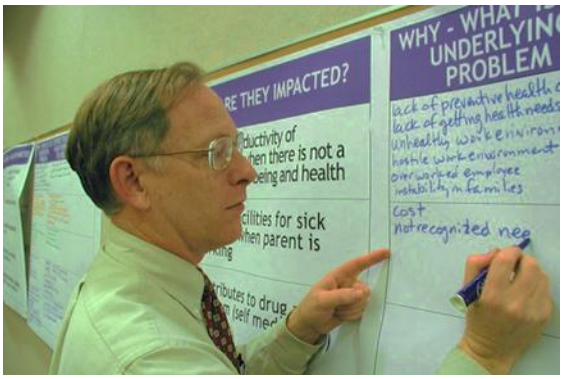
How can this be done most effectively? How can you and the group you assemble make a difference? Can a group of citizens really decide on a course of action when they see the issue from different perspectives? In situations like this, a process called public deliberation employed to help those involved understand the problem, identify the options available, and decide what to do may be helpful.

Naming the issue

The first vital step in the process is to carefully identify the problem or issue for which a solution is sought. Another way to approach it is to say, what is bothering us, and why is it bothering us? There may be many different answers. The challenge is to try to identify core concerns in a way that resonates with a great number of people without alienating others. It is also helpful to name the problem in a way that reveals how different things that are important to people may be in tension in any solution. This process is called naming. It is extremely important to identify or define the problem you want to address because, until we get the right name for the issue or problem, the discussion cannot be properly focused or "framed."

Framing the issue

Once the issue has been named or the problem described, the next step is to identify the options or choices that are available. In other words, what are some of the alternative ways



that one might attempt to solve the problem? Some individuals may quickly advocate one approach, but others may favor a different option. It is helpful to identify at least three alternatives that might be pursued in order to avoid the polarization that is likely to emerge when only two options are considered. It is also important that each option address the core concerns that were surfaced in the naming process.

For each of the options that might be pursued, the advantages and disadvantages need to be described. Each option will have reasons that support it; but there are apt to be "trade-offs" or costs that detract from the approach as well. The pros and cons of each option need to be analyzed with careful consideration to what the group most values—i.e. what are we trying to achieve? What is most important to us? Is it the cost, the number or type of people served, our safety, or some other factor that is central to our concerns?

Public Deliberation

The questions above form the starting point of the public deliberation process. Once the initial naming and framing is completed, participants interested in finding a solution to the problem should be invited to review the naming and framing information, share their views, and listen to what others have to say. As people wrestle with what is most important to them collectively and what they may or may not be willing to sacrifice, they may begin to identify a course of action that most of them can support. At the very least, they can usually identify the things on which they agree and decide upon some initial steps that can be taken to address the problem.

This common ground, however small, can be an important first step. The opportunity to hear others' authentic concerns, rather than caricatures of their concerns, also tends to help people see the problem in a new light. The options may begin to appear more nuanced, and less black and white.

Most people who are really interested in addressing a problem will need to meet again and again over time to continually refine their understanding of the problem and its challenges. The composition of the group may also change as they feel the need to bring in other people to share their experiences and resources. As the group begins to act, or to talk to government and other officials about how they might respond, they will continue wrestling with what is most important to them and how best to achieve it. These deliberations should continue to shape the actions that follow, allowing people to check themselves on their decisions.