Deliberation Points the Direction for Iowa Libraries

by Jennifer Wilding and Mary Jo Draper

When we talk about local control, what do we consider "local"? If a wealthy community can afford better services, is it obliged to share with poorer areas? Is efficiency what matters most, or are other values more important? These were some of the issues grappled with during Libraries Together in Scott County, Iowa, a project that combined research and analysis with a deliberative survey and public forums.

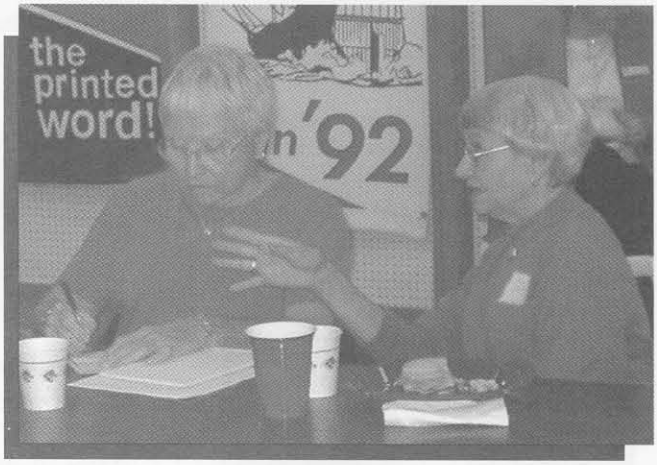
In 2004, the four public libraries in Scott County – the area surrounding Davenport, Iowa, USA – faced almost certain changes in how they operated. Local leaders had formed a Blue Ribbon Committee to look at ways local governments could collaborate or combine services, and the Iowa governor had mandated that governments share services on a regional level. Both initiatives were expected to affect libraries.

> *"The public in each city is wanting more. They like collaboration but want individual character. As a public official I really see that as a conflict."*
>
> Member, Blue Ribbon Committee

Rather than wait for change to be imposed on them, the libraries chose to be proactive. They commissioned a 10-month study, completed in December 2005, to identify options for action and the likely stakeholder response to each. They hired Consensus, a non-profit firm based in Kansas City, Missouri, USA to conduct the study.

Deliberative Processes

Libraries Together involved stakeholders and citizens through its entire process, starting with extensive interviews and a customer satisfaction survey. The cornerstone of the study was the deliberative forums and deliberative survey. The survey and forums occurred after Libraries Together released reports on the current state of libraries in Scott County and on opportunities for increased internal efficiency, collaboration, and unification. (These reports are available at www.librariestogether.org.)



Participants share ideas at a forum at the Davenport Public Library.

We chose to use deliberation because values were in conflict and no one solution would be painless; each came with tradeoffs and consequences. By presenting three options for action – be more independent, collaborate more, or unify into one library – we knew that the community would move beyond solution wars and toward common ground for action. While this effort focused on public libraries, the deliberative process would be valuable in a variety of situations when the question isn't what can we do, but what should we do, such as when governments restructure or when communities seek to operate as a region.

Key Decisions Set the Stage for Deliberation

The directors of the four public libraries began meeting about a year before they commissioned the study. Each director represented a library with its own strengths and distinct character:

- The Bettendorf Public Library serves an affluent suburban area and has a history of drawing large numbers of nonresident borrowers.
- The Davenport Public Library serves the business district and urban core, and is the library for historical and genealogical research.
- The LeClaire Community Library opened in 2004 and serves a formerly blue-collar town of 3,000 that is experiencing an influx of affluent new residents.
- The Scott County Library System operates a headquarters library with eight branches and a bookmobile in the rural areas, which make up most of the county's land mass.

The foundation for Libraries Together was the trust built among the directors. The directors felt responsible to one another and each, at different times, assumed a leadership role. The team of directors made two important decisions that allowed the deliberative process to work:

1. **All options would be considered and nothing was off the table.** Including the option of unifying into one library was politically difficult but absolutely necessary. The timing could have been better, though, as the study occurred when one library had just formed, another was in the midst of a capital campaign, and the county system was beginning its own restructuring process. Despite the problems it caused for them, the directors agreed that it was vital to get the public's thoughts on unification.
2. **No decisions would be made without considering public opinion.** The libraries did not promise that the public would cast the deciding vote, but that public

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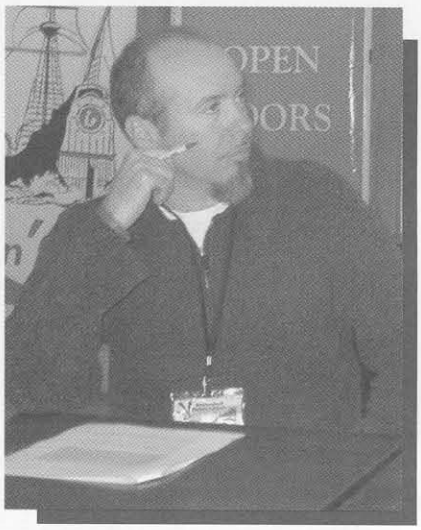

A staff member from the Bettendorf Public Library listens to another opinion during a forum held in Davenport.

opinions would be considered. They also promised not to ask the public to rubber-stamp decisions that had already been made. The Consensus team never felt pressure to produce a particular outcome and, thus, could work with the public in good faith.

In addition, the directors were willing to trust a process that was more complex and risky than a traditional public hearing or focus group. They were also consistently willing to set aside what might be best for them personally to consider what was best for their patrons and communities.

The Deliberative Forums and Survey

The Consensus team developed a discussion guide that provided background information on each library, including the taxes it received and the quality of service it provided. The guide laid out the three options for action – be more independent, collaborate, or unify; the values involved; arguments for and against; and actions that the community could take. The National Issues Forums and Public Agenda served as models for the discussion guide. Consensus team members had used those guides extensively, had created new guides, and had both received and conducted training in how to create a discussion guide. We would not have chosen the deliberative model without that depth of understanding of how it should work.

Over the course of a week, the team conducted 13 forums. Along with forums for members of the public, separate forums were held with key stakeholder groups, including board members, staff, Friends of the Library, and members of the Blue Ribbon Committee, as well as a meeting that included every mayor and city or county administrator. This assured that the voices of each group would remain distinct and, by bringing cohort groups from the four libraries together, it helped build trust and understanding. It also assured that experts or those with a financial stake in the outcome did not unduly influence the general public.

The choices in the survey corresponded to the three options for action. The survey was designed to get public opinion on how libraries should be governed and funded, and how services should be provided. We offered respondents several possibilities, which were built around the three major options for action. Then we asked which of several considerations had the biggest impact on their choosing a particular option and which of several values was most important to them.

"I think local control is fair. It gives the local community the opportunity to pay more for a higher level of service. To say everyone should pay the same, it guarantees mediocrity. It doesn't give local libraries the chance to excel."

Forum participant

The four-page survey went to a random sample of 4,888 county residents. Of those, 1,699 were completed, for a 34.8 percent response rate that represents a margin of error of +/- 2.4 percent at a 95 percent confidence level.

While the public forums drew people who used the library heavily, the survey allowed us to hear from those whose library use ranged from heavy to none. Because it was a random sample, the survey also provided a sense of certainty. During the forums, people could listen to other opinions and test their own ideas with a group, while survey respondents worked alone with relatively little background information. The survey results, therefore, were more likely to predict the results of a countywide vote.

In developing the discussion guide and survey, two things worked especially well:

1. **Holding a test forum with local residents.** Creating a discussion guide is more of an art than a science. We invited individuals with deliberative experience to review the guide, which was very valuable. Even more valuable was testing the guide with local citizens to find out what worked and did not work for them. It prompted a major rewrite of the section explaining who pays how much for libraries, among other things.
2. **Introducing a controversial action.** One approach was to become more independent, and one action was that individuals would have to pay to use any library that was not their home library. Was that likely to happen? Not at all. However, taking the approach to the logical extreme spurred some people to attend the forums and answer surveys. It also provided fascinating insights into people's thinking about who should pay for government services.

The Findings

At the forums, participants generally agreed that collaboration was working and should be increased. Some groups saw collaboration as a step toward one unified library while others thought it was an end unto itself. Every group saw being more independent as a step

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backwards. Forum participants were unwilling to give up two things: (1) reciprocal borrowing, which allowed them to use any library for free, and (2) the individual character and personality of each library.

"It's easy to say you want independence when you're living in Bettendorf or Davenport, but I drove in many times (from Scott County) to make sure my kids got what they needed."

Forum participant

Survey respondents agreed that collaboration was by far the best way to provide services. The most popular considerations were that it made sense to collaborate if money could be saved or services improved, and that they wanted free access to any library. Collaboration – four boards of trustees conducting joint planning – was also the most popular way to govern local libraries.

One survey result was surprising. While the great majority favored collaboration as the way to govern and provide services, that was not the case when it came to paying for libraries. Instead, a majority wanted a countywide property tax that would fund all the libraries. Respondents said everyone should pay the same tax rate and that citizens rather than government should decide what to spend on libraries. While only about a third of all respondents were willing to pay more for library services if the four unified into one library, over 70 percent said they were willing to pay more if they paid the same tax rate as everyone else.

In the forums, participants struggled with the ramifications of a countywide tax. Some thought that it would be fairer to have the same tax rate and that libraries would receive more funding if they did not have to compete with other city services. On the other hand, some were concerned that it would reduce the quality of services in the suburbs and that it would be hard to find a fair way to distribute funds to each library.

Benefits of Using Deliberation

Deliberation is a tough-love method of public participation. It is hard work and can be frustrating for participants because it expects them to make the hard choices inherent in public policy. Deliberation asks people what they want, but it also asks what they are willing to give up in order to get it.

Deliberation is not always the right process to use, and other processes offer their own distinct benefits. Using deliberation in Scott County, however, allowed the Consensus team to achieve richer results than we believe we would have gotten from other processes. For example:

- **Deliberation showed not just what people think, but why they think the way they do.** Addressing values like fairness, interdependence, tradition, and efficiency produced exceptionally thoughtful conversations.
- **Offering three different options for action generated trust.** Because the guide made the best case for each option, it was clear that the public was not being asked to be a rubber stamp.
- **Deliberation identified some major misconceptions.** Two in particular are important. First, people had no idea of the impact of their community's tax capacity on their taxes. While suburban residents paid about twice as much per capita for library services, many were very surprised to learn that if everyone paid the same rate, their taxes would actually rise. Secondly, people assumed that it cost nothing when they borrowed a book from a library to which they didn't pay taxes, when the actual cost was $2-$4 per item. In both cases, the public would benefit from information.
- **Deliberation identified sacred cows.** Asking people to consider tradeoffs told us what they were unwilling to give up, in this case free reciprocal borrowing and the loss of the distinct character of their libraries.

Libraries Together is viewed as a model for restructuring library services throughout Iowa and is even seen by some as offering important lessons on providing government services in general. We believe that much of the value of our work with Libraries Together was that it combined extensive data gathering with the rich, nuanced results possible through deliberation.

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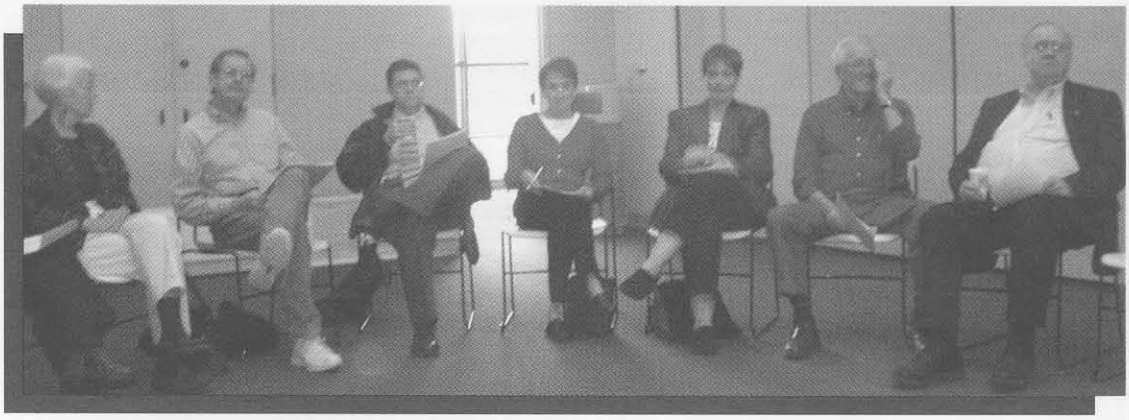

Community members gather for a forum at the Bettendorf Public Library.