

Also In This Issue:

How we make important community decisions

A checklist to ensure openness and transparency

Are storage facilities, factory farms an environmental threat?

The new convention center: an important opportunity for public participation

Here's An Idea For Congress: Try Democracy

By Lee Hamilton, Center for Congress

National discussion on our federal budget

CITIZENS OPPOSE DECISION TO CLOSE HILLCREST GOLF COURSE

Public forum and survey both point to significant opposition



Results of a May 20 public forum and a May 26-27 public opinion poll point to overwhelming opposition to the City of Owensboro's decision to close Hillcrest Golf Course.

“At the forum, we attracted an overflow crowd and spirited discussions after

we presented both sides of the issue,” said Rodney Berry, president of the foundation and moderator of the forum. “But because most of the forum participants were either golfers or residents of the Hillcrest neighborhood, it was suggested to us that we supplement the forum with a professional poll that would reflect a scientific sampling of the community.”

The results of the poll conducted at the conclusion of the public forum:

- 72 to 5 support keeping Hillcrest as a golf course
- 76 to 1 oppose converting Hillcrest to a park
- 73 to 4 oppose leasing Hillcrest to a private manager
- 76 to 0 oppose selling the property to a developer for a subdivision

In the follow-up poll of 500 registered voters, by more than a two-to-one margin, citizens say that closing Hillcrest Golf Course is “the wrong thing for Owensboro to do.”

The survey was conducted by SurveyUSA and sponsored by the Public Life Foundation of Owensboro, an organization that promotes public participation in community decisions and public policy.

Continues on next page

Continued from previous page

Of the 500 people surveyed:

- 67 percent said Owensboro has about the right amount of public parks.
- 26 percent said Owensboro has too few public parks.
- 6 percent said Owensboro has too many public parks.
Note: During the May 20 forum, it was reported that Owensboro has substantially less public park acreage than comparable cities in our region.
- 44 percent said we have about the right amount of golf courses.
- 41 percent said we have too few.
- 13 percent said we have too many
During the forum, it was reported that, according to the National Golf Foundation, Owensboro-Daviess County has more golf courses than the market can support.
- 42 percent said that city-owned golf courses should be allowed to run at a loss
- 41 percent said they should be required to break even financially
- 48 percent said that Hillcrest should remain open as a golf course, but increase green fees enough that it breaks even
- 31 percent said the course should remain open and continue to run at a loss
- 17 percent said the course should be converted to a park
- Even those who do not play golf supported keeping Hillcrest open: 75 percent to 19 percent who support converting the course to a park.
- 36 percent said it would cost about the same to maintain a public park as a golf course
- 26 percent said a public park would cost more to maintain than a golf course
- 22 percent said a public park would cost less to maintain than a golf course

With regard to closing Hillcrest Golf Course to reduce financial losses:

- 61 percent said it is the wrong thing for Owensboro to do
- 26 percent said that it is the right thing to do
- 13 percent are not sure
- Those who said it is the wrong thing to do increased to 71 percent among golfers
- 19 percent of golfers said it is the right thing to do
- 51 percent said that Hillcrest would not serve very well or at all well as a city park
- 45 percent said that Hillcrest would serve very well or somewhat well as a city park
- 44 percent said that Hillcrest golfers will not switch to the Hawes Park golf course if Hillcrest is converted to a park
- 31 percent said they would switch to the Hawes Park golf course
- 25 percent were not sure
- 54 percent do not agree with the plan to close Hillcrest and attract more golfers to Hawes Park in order to reduce the subsidy for the Hawes Park course
- 25 percent agree with that plan
- 21 percent are not sure

The random sample survey had a margin of error from +/- 4.2 to 4.5 percent.

“I would like to think that officials and candidates appreciate this information and will take this professional survey under consideration in making their decisions,” Berry said. “Sometimes in a rush to show progress, officials don’t take time to engage the community at-large, and in particular, the affected stakeholders. Citizens know that officials can’t please everyone, but they want their voices heard.”

The full report is available on the SurveyUSA web site:

<http://www.surveyusa.com/client/PollReport.aspx?g=832cb30e-0ace-4e6b-af0e-e78e1fedff04>



How we make important community decisions *A checklist to ensure openness and transparency*

The decision of the city commission to close Hillcrest Golf Course is another example of a shortcoming in our public policies and practices. The decision may have been made in good faith. It may have been based on solid rationale. It may prove to be the correct decision in the long-term. But because officials made no attempt to engage the community and affected stakeholders in the decision making process, the action alienated many citizens from their local government and mobilized opposition to the point where it may be a pivotal issue in the November general election.

Officials cannot be expected to postpone every decision while they inform citizens and engage in dialogue with them. Many officials believe they were elected to do a job and at times that involves making difficult, unpopular decisions

It's true that many citizens do not participate until a matter affects them directly. Many have grown apathetic or cynical because they don't believe their views matter. The public appears to be most disturbed because so many major decisions are made behind closed doors.

When is a decision important enough to warrant a good faith effort to engage the community? When a decision may increase taxes or fees? When there is a potential increase in air or water pollution? When a decision creates an eyesore? When the decision directly affects a recreational resource of many citizens?

Such a decision is not easy and involves a degree of subjectivity. Yet that does not minimize the importance of an open and transparent process that builds trust and confidence between the people and their institutions.

Therefore, we encourage public officials – city and county government officials, school boards, governing boards of tax districts (health department, public library, etc.) and major nonprofit community institutions (OMHS, arts organizations, etc.) – as a matter of routine as it relates to any major decision, to ask yourselves the following questions:

Checklist to Ensure Openness and Transparency *Community leaders: As you face major decisions, ask yourself...*

- Can you make a genuine effort to engage the public in this decision early in the process? yes no
- Can you provide and promote opportunities for public dialogue beyond the mandated public hearings? yes no
- Can these public meetings be conducted at convenient times and places for most people? yes no
- Can you share relevant information and all the options connected with the pending decision in a clear, balanced, and easy to understand manner? yes no
- Can you give the public ample time to digest the information and respond to officials before the voting occurs? yes no
- Can you deliberate publicly rather than simply promote our pre-selected preference? yes no

We challenge public officials and community leaders to embrace this higher standard of openness and transparency. Let's give it a chance. Let's see if it builds good will and trust in our community.

ARE storage facilities, factory farms AN environmental threat?

The BP disaster in the Gulf of Mexico is a reminder of how things that were never supposed to be capable of happening can, in fact, happen.

In October 2000, a Massey Energy sludge impoundment broke through an underground mine and propelled 300 million gallons of sludge down two tributaries of the Tug Fork River in Martin County, Kentucky. The spill polluted hundreds of miles of waterways, contaminated water supplies for over 27,000 residents and killed all the aquatic life in area streams. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, the spill was 30 times larger than the Exxon Valdez.

We live in an area blessed with rivers and tributaries, with rich and productive bottomland and wildlife. Should we be concerned about the storage of coal ash along area rivers? What about large scale hog or chicken operations which are near the banks of our rivers?

- How many such facilities do we have near area rivers? Can these facilities become a danger? If so, at what level, and are we close to that level?

- Do any of these storage facilities contain hazardous and carcinogenic materials?
- What kinds of things – natural or human error – can trigger an accident or spill?
- What are the ramifications – to our local-area economy, to our rivers, the fish populations and ecosystem?
- Are we prepared if there is an accident?
- Are there environmental checks and monitors in place? If these are state agencies, will repeated budget cuts reduce their capacity to conduct inspections?

Whose responsibility is it to stay on top of environmental issues in our city and county? There are environmental groups – DC Sweep, Sierra Club, Audubon Society, Watershed Watch, Environmental Impact Council – but they do not have the resources or authority to intervene. Should we have a “go to” group with an executive director who is knowledgeable in environmental issues, technology and disaster management?

The new convention center: an important opportunity for public participation

The downtown “placemaking” master plan has been characterized by extensive public participation: design workshops, stakeholder meetings, advisory committee meetings, and other public meetings. The 650 participants in the 2007 “We the People” Town Meeting identified the “transformation” of downtown as their top priority during the discussion period on community and economic development.

Unfortunately, there was not substantive public participation in the financing of the public sector projects included in the plan. Although many citizens still support the plan, the lack of public dialogue certainly contributed to the ensuing public outcry and opposition to the plan.

Now that the anchor project of the master plan is moving forward, local officials have an exceptional opportunity to reach out and engage the community in the options for the proposed convention center. A citizens advisory committee is working side-by-side with CityVisions, the Louisville consulting firm retained by the city and county to conduct the feasibility study. A more systematic public involvement plan is warranted.

CityVisions recently made a case for excluding an arena from the convention center, citing complications with scheduling and logistics. Changes in the plan will occur, and this may be a necessary adjustment, but dropping the arena is inconsistent with the original proposal, and citizens will be interested in why this change was necessary.

There are many other decisions yet to make on this important and ambitious community investment. Citizens will have an interest in:

- The footprint of the building, and the affect that will have on the downtown master plan, including the hotel, riverfront and Executive Inn property.
- The design of the facility. Architects should not be expected to design several buildings, but they can share several comparable prototypes to determine which designs, in a general sense, are most aesthetically appealing to the public.
- The financing of the project: the investment that county government, city government and state government will have in the project, the amount to be spent from cash reserves, the interest rate on the bonds, the impact on cash flow, etc.
- The operations plan: projected budget, staff and subsidy needed.

We would be well-served as a community if the steering committee and public officials reached out to the community at-large for a meaningful role in bringing the convention center project into focus. That’s not to suggest that any plan will be without opposition, but a good faith effort to reach out will lead to a stronger base of citizens who are well-informed. It will reduce the rancor and build good will around what should be a project to celebrate.

Here's An Idea For Congress: Try Democracy

by Lee Hamilton

In both the Senate and the House, the give-and-take that ought to be part of the legislative process is now far too easily shut down. Former Congressman Lee Hamilton says that if it wants to address its dysfunction, "Here's An Idea For Congress: Try Democracy."

Strategists for the Democratic and Republican parties are pondering how best to use Congress's vote on health-care reform in the fall elections. Both sides will undoubtedly go overboard in trying to spin the issue in their favor, but it's fair game. Members of Congress went on record with their votes, and now the American public has a chance to weigh the pros and cons of their actions.

But wait. We may get to hold our representatives to account for health-care overhaul writ large, but on any number of crucial issues, we don't actually know how Congress might have acted. A public option for people seeking an alternative to the private health-insurance market? Not even voted on in the Senate, because a couple of Democratic senators objected to the idea. Malpractice reform as a way of reining in runaway costs? Never made it to the floor for an up-or-down vote. A single-payer system, supported in the polls by a majority of Americans? Not even a floor debate.

These are key issues, and if you step back a moment, it's actually quite incredible that Congress would try to reform the health-care system without voting on them.

But then, there are a lot of things Congress doesn't vote on these days. Scores of high-ranking positions in various federal departments have gone unfilled for many months because some senator put a "hold" on the nomination — often for reasons unrelated to the nomination itself. Crucial votes affecting Americans' lives get wrapped up in tit-for-tat political maneuvering that either postpones their consideration or finishes it off altogether. As

New York magazine put it recently about an unseemly delay last fall in extending unemployment benefits to laid-off Americans, the bill "spent a month in limbo...before the Senate passed it by a vote of 98-0, suggesting lawmakers spent a full month dicker-ing over a measure that pretty much everyone agreed to from the start."

It is especially notable these days that a simple majority of senators cannot work their will in the Senate. That body's rules make it possible to threaten a filibuster — in essence, to threaten endless debate — unless 60 votes can be mustered. This makes it exceedingly difficult to accomplish anything. A single senator placing a hold on legislation — as one senator from Kentucky famously did in March on legislation extending unemployment benefits — can gum up not only Capitol Hill, but Americans' lives.

For much of its regular business, the Senate no longer operates by majority rule. How did that come about in a world-renowned democratic body?

I want to be careful here. The Senate was designed, in part, to temper runaway popular sentiment and to make sure that issues of great import were considered carefully. Its rules evolved differently from those of the House for just that reason, and there's much to be said for legislating deliberately and thoughtfully — even slowly.

What we've been seeing of late, however, is not deliberation but frustration — in both senses of that word. With the rise in extreme partisanship on Capitol Hill, the Senate has become

Continues on next page

Continued from previous page

a far less functional body. As New York magazine put it, “The same Senate rules that were designed to check populist passions can, when adopted by passionate populists, turn the place into a governing body of 100 autocrats.” This cannot be good for the country.

The issues in the House are different — but quite revealing as a result. There, majority rule isn’t the question; it’s runaway majority rule. House procedures call to mind Madison’s worries about a possible “tyranny of the majority.” The House majority routinely and skillfully shapes the rules for procedures on the House floor in order to exclude votes on major policy options and deny members, usually the minority, from offering key amendments that could affect the final shape of legislation. How did that happen in the House — where, supposedly, the people govern?

On one side of Capitol Hill, then, the give-and-take that ought to be part of the legislative process is now far too easily shut down by the minority. On the other side, it’s all too often shut down by the majority. Rules that allowed for a balance between

deliberation and effectiveness when followed judiciously are producing the opposite when pushed too far.

The answer, I think, is to reassert democracy as a goal. At both ends of the Capitol, legislators should have the chance to argue over and then vote on the key issues that Americans care about. There are several instances in which our Constitution calls for more than a simple majority, including overriding a presidential veto or ratifying a Constitutional amendment. On everything else, let’s allow a measure onto the floor through a fair process, then vote it up or down by simple majority rule. Why should the world’s greatest democracy not practice democracy?

Lee Hamilton is Director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University. He was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives for 34 years.

National discussion on our federal budget

On June 26, citizens in 19 cities will simultaneously be engaged in thoughtful discussion about the federal budget. Participants will come from all walks of life to examine various options for putting our country back on a sustainable path.

The Kentucky event is being coordinated by Kentucky Youth Advocates. *AmericaSpeaks*, a Washington DC-based organization that partnered with the 2007 “We the People” Town Meeting in Owensboro.

The Louisville event will take place at the Gheens Academy, 4425 Preston Highway, from 11:30 a.m. - 6:00 p.m. (EST). Those interested in participating should contact Patricia Tennen at ptennen@kyyouth.org or (502) 895-8167 (ext. 120).