

The Community Preservation Institute: Opportunities for Reflecting on Education for Sustainability

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Questions about how to achieve sustainable development have become increasingly urgent in many cities and towns throughout the United States and overseas. For many years, visionaries have argued for the need for a kind of development that can be sustained over time and across generations without creating undue harm. Only in the last few years, however, have citizen leaders in individual cities and towns begun to realize that concerns about sustainability are important in their own communities. Citizen leaders are confronting first hand the effects of sprawl, out of control development, and the need to have a plan for recruiting businesses to the community that will provide jobs but not at the cost of damaging the environment.

The problems become very apparent in a state such as Massachusetts, where the population has increased by a mere 12% from 1970 to 2000 and the consumption of land for development has increased an astounding 46%. Many communities are at or near “buildout,” where there simply is no land available that has not been previously developed. As a result, community leaders have begun to realize the need to identify alternative routes to development that will preserve the quality of life in their communities.

The puzzle, of course, is how best to get education into the hands of the citizen leaders who will be responsible for many of the decisions about development that are

made in local cities and town. In this paper we wish to describe one approach, the Community Preservation Institute, for preparing citizen leaders to address issues of sustainable development. Because this approach is unique in its origin, design, outreach, and impact, we intend to describe it in some detail. As shall be seen, what we have attempted to do with the Community Preservation Institute raises timely issues about how to approach sustainable development, how educational approaches of this kind can be maintained in times of severe budget cutbacks, and how the impact that such training can be assessed.

Four challenges confront those who would design effective programs on education for sustainability: (1) the citizen leaders in our cities and towns do not frame their work in terms of ‘education for sustainability’ even though most observers would say that this is exactly the issue with which they are grappling, (2) little in the way of a regional infrastructure exists that could bring communities together to share their understanding of sustainable development and act in concert on that understanding, (3) little in the way of trainings are available that are designed to meet the highly varied needs of adult citizen learners, and (4) even if such trainings were available, most communities have few resources to underwrite the efforts of their citizen leaders to become educated on this topic. So, at the level of motivation, programs, and resources there are daunting problems to be overcome. The story of how the Community Preservation Institute was designed to address these issues is an interesting and timely one that speaks to the kind of sustained problem solving that states may have to engage in as they attempt to come to terms with how to have a more informed and engaged citizenry.

The Community Preservation Institute: What Is It

In brief, the Community Preservation Institute trains citizen leaders to think about development in an integrated way that emphasizes environmental sustainability. A joint venture between the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (EOEA) and the University of Massachusetts (UMass) launched in Spring 2001, the nine course evening training program offered throughout the state of Massachusetts takes up many of the issues that emerge with sustainable development, including adaptive reuse, brownfields, housing, open space, transportation, community economic development. The training is designed to prepare community leaders to think through issues of how to preserve the character of their community in the face of growth pressures by encouraging development in patterns and places that best preserve it. The course is free to citizen leaders and was designed to fill a gap in training that was available for adults. Detailed information about the training is available on line at <http://compres.env.state.ma.us/> and in the forthcoming book with a working title *Preserving and Enhancing Communities: A Guide for Citizens, Officials and Planners*.

The process through which this training originated reflects the convergence of a number of sets of factors and events beginning in January 1999:

- Massachusetts as a state was grappling with the question of how to organize an approach to smart growth that would reflect the political realities of the state—in which most political decisions are made at the local level—and that would be consistent with strong environmental practices.

- The state had just appointed a new Secretary of Environmental Affairs, Robert Durand, who was creatively searching for ways to bring together the disparate efforts in the communities to address issues of environmental problems, open space, adaptive reuse, and the need for affordable housing. He recognized that previous efforts to address such local problems without an integrated approach had been unsuccessful.
- The state environmental agency, the Massachusetts Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, and the state research universities, the University of Massachusetts system, were beginning to recognize that the potential for them to work together on a variety of projects had not even begun to be explored.

Secretary Durand was successful in making Community Preservation *the* central theme of the work of EOEA throughout his tenure. He originated and helped to pass the Community Preservation Act and reorganized the work within EOEA to reflect the importance of community preservation as a concept for sound, balanced planning by launching a statewide Community Preservation Initiative to help communities address growth and development issues. EOEA consistently worked to bridge the gap between state efforts and those of local cities and towns where many of the decisions about development are actually made.

Using the term ‘community preservation’ instead of ‘sustainable development’ was far from a case of simply old wine in new bottles. The term opened up a new set of connections, links, and opportunities. Community Preservation was defined as “preserving and enhancing the quality of life in Massachusetts, community by community and watershed by watershed”. The use of the term community preservation

as a concept for planning helped citizen leaders see the importance of the decisions they made at the community level recognizing they had to balance a variety of issues when making growth decisions. Perhaps even more importantly, this emphasis on community preservation assisted EOEA in seeing how great was the need for appropriate education that would help those in the midst of making local decisions.

The Commonwealth Partnership

Enter the Commonwealth Partnership. EOEA and the UMass System, both parts of state government, had had at best sporadic, intermittent, fleeting working relationships with each other. Over the years little had taken place that had deepened these relationships in significant ways. Yet the promise of beneficial working relationships was there. In January 2000, EOEA and UMass entered into an agreement to create the Commonwealth Partnership, a partnership by which policy makers and faculty would form a sustained working relationship that included education, policy, and research initiatives.

The EOEA initiative on community preservation provided an important opportunity for EOEA, the policy arm of state government, and UMass, the education arm, to come together and devise strategies by which citizens could be engaged in devising plans for sustainable development. What evolved was an interesting process of planning, joint decision making, and joint discovery of the skills within both branches of government as well as the differences in perspectives of how citizen leaders can best be prepared for leading their communities through the tangled set of issues that emerge in addressing sustainable development.

EOEA had created many different resources for communities addressing issues of growth and development, including buildout analyses, small and large scale “summit” meetings on key topics, and a web site providing resources for pursuing community preservation. What was missing, EOEA found, was an educational resource that assisted communities in thinking about these issues. EOEA and UMass began to plan. Everything about this educational resource was essentially up for grabs: the topics that would be included, the format, who would teach the courses, how participants would be recruited, and how EOEA and UMass would allocate responsibilities.

The UMass Donahue Institute was critical to developing and launching the Institute within an aggressive six month timeline. Since the Donahue staff had years of experience in curriculum development as well as connections with faculty at all five campuses, they managed the day-to-day creation of the Institute. EOEA and Donahue staff worked closely together to identify potential instructors, course format and approve substantive content of course materials.

EOEA and UMass wanted to emulate their team approach within the Institute so we designed each class to be co-taught by two Instructors. University educators, state agency policy-makers and community leaders were tapped to lead the individual courses, allowing students at least two different viewpoints on any given issue.

With each offering of the Institute, EOEA and UMass instituted changes based upon feedback from the previous session. The Institute, originally a seven week evening program, added two additional classes and extended, by 30 minutes, the time of each class. We created “specialty” classes to reflect the uniqueness of each campus – “Diversity in Community Preservation” at Lowell, “Natural Resources as a Catalyst for

Economic Development” at Dartmouth, “Creative Zoning” in Lowell and “Brownfields and Environmental Justice” in Boston. When students requests more in depth study on a particular topic of interest and more interaction with their colleagues, we created team projects. By making changes with each offering, the Institute was constantly refining itself.

Do Participants Really “Get” the Idea of Sustainable Development?

The intent of Community Preservation Institute is in part to help local leaders think about sustainable development through the lens of community preservation. Throughout the nine weeks, students are exposed to a number of topics using real growth and development examples facing their communities. The Institute offers a Whitman sampler approach, providing students with a “taste” of one topic area that, when presented together with the others, make up community preservation. The course acts as a springboard, encouraging participants to act using their new found information.

From the initial course where students are asked to draw their community, the classes focus on encouraging students to approach growth issues in a different way – through a new lens. Throughout the course, students are asked to identify the various players and their interests concerning a given growth issue so they can learn about different viewpoints and balance them and the interests they represent when making local decisions. Students have reported using course materials to ask informed questions when considering proposals before them as members of the local planning, zoning and governing boards, and to train their colleagues about principles of community preservation.

Sustainable development recognizes the importance of taking a holistic approach to addressing many growth concerns facing our cities and towns. Encouraging a regional perspective to address these issues is emphasized by the class make-up which is composed of 25 students from an average of 20 different communities. The Institute allows students to understand, first hand, that many of the issues they are dealing with in their communities are the same issues faced by their neighbors in adjacent communities. Many of the courses, for example the one on water, discuss regional solutions to local problems, providing better protection, more efficiency regarding resources and shared responsibility among neighboring communities.

Has the Development of the Institute Transformed EOEA and UMass?

The development of the Institute was certainly aimed at finding ways to provide customized education around sustainability that are effective for the citizen leaders of Massachusetts. But perhaps equally important has been the goal of having the joint development of this training engage EOEA and UMass in new ways on the topic of sustainability development so that they generate new strategies, new programs, new research, and new ways for students to be involved in sustainability development.

The successful collaboration with the Institute lead EOEA and UMass to engage in additional ventures regarding sustainable development. First, in Spring 2003, the partnership launched *Community Preservation: Youth Visions*, a two day, on campus program designed to inform youth leaders about sustainable development using the Community Preservation curriculum model as a base. Second, the partnership is completing the manuscript for a guidebook for citizens, planners and local officials regarding sustainable development written by Institute instructors. Finally, UMass and

EOEA created the “Online Learning Center” to keep Institute alumni connected and informed by allowing them to post questions and answers concerning growth issues in their cities and towns.

The Massachusetts Budget Crisis and Prospects for Continuation

Currently, the state faces a difficult budget crisis causing tough decisions to be made regarding community outreach programs. Since the initial launch of CPI in Spring 2001, EOEA financially underwrote the development and implementation of the Community Preservation Institute, enabling citizen leaders to take the course at no cost. Although the actual dollar and in-kind costs significantly decreased over the Institute’s tenure, the cost on a per student were quite substantial. The question now becomes one of how this kind of joint program can be continued in the face of severe financial stress on the part of both parties.

We are currently struggling with the fiscal reality and are considering different possibilities. For example, should the role of the Commonwealth Partnership be to invest in the development of new ways to reach people, with the goal that what we create would then be turned over to others to carry out? EOEA and UMass are in a good position, having created and revised the Institute’s curriculum and operation for five consecutive semesters. With some further refinement, we can offer a ready-made curriculum model to be used by other entities or Institutions. This option is particularly attractive to community outreach organizations that are engaged in educating local leaders, but do not have resources for additional curriculum development. In addition, it will allow the course to be taught independent of financial resources available to EOEA and UMass.

Another possibility we are considering is whether online free education might be an effective avenue to offer training to citizen leaders. Working with UMass online, we can reduce per student costs by reaching a larger population of students and limiting overhead and administrative costs associated with site locations. We can maintain continuity by using the established curriculum and selecting our online instructors from the existing pool of Institute instructors. However, we are trying to balance the desire to reach a larger number of local leaders with the opportunity to interact, in a classroom setting, with colleagues from another community. The face to face networking is a feature that cannot be underestimated as the Institute is designed to encourage such interaction long after the evening program has ended.

Yet a third possibility is that the UMass system consider how to integrate the training into regular course offerings that would be available not simply to undergraduates but also to citizen leaders. This possibility would involve a fee to cover course credits. The partnership avoided charging a fee in the past in an effort to attract local leaders from all communities rather than from only those communities that could assume the cost of a program. In addition, the Institute was seen as a reward for local leaders who continually give up their time on volunteer boards and organization.

Final Thoughts on the Four Questions Raised by the Community

Preservation Institute

Having completed five semesters of the Community Preservation Institute, EOE and UMass officials are now able to provide considerable perspective on how the Institute met its four challenges outlined at the outset. Some results were predictable while others were unexpected results of the implementation of the Institute.

Local leaders have a major responsibility in shaping our cities and towns since they make the majority of growth decisions in our communities. Their job is made easier if they have the proper tools and information to make decisions and if their constituent base is educated about good development that will help preserve the special character of our communities. The Institute provided a forum for local leaders to gain confidence in understanding and addressing growth issues and to be part of a network of local leaders who “get it” when it comes to making decisions that promote sustainable development.

Second, the Institute filled a need for local leaders. While different regional partnerships created to consider and address growth and development issues exist in Massachusetts, none of the entities provides the kind of infrastructure and clearinghouse for local leaders created by the Institute. The Institute, through its Online Learning Center, is a repository for seeking advice about growth issues facing our cities and towns. Students can maintain their connection with their classmates and other Institute graduates and instructors and seek advice through the web.

Third, the Institute met a need of adult learners who were active in their communities. UMass operates the Citizens Planning and Training Collaborative, a successful, practical program that offers courses on individual subjects, including implementation of new laws and regulations. The Institute provided a broader focus by linking a variety of subjects, many of which involve issues that compete with each other in any given development decision. Adults are used to determining how everything fits into a wider context – the Institute provided it.

Finally, by offering the Institute free of charge, UMass and EOEA attracted local leaders from all over the state which may have been prohibitive if individuals or

communities were charged a tuition. Not many training programs underwrite their costs and the Institute was seen as a special opportunity from the state.

While the future of the nine week evening program is uncertain, the Institute has provided an excellent model for community education and outreach on sustainable development. More importantly, it has solidified a partnership between EOEA and UMass to engage in future collaborative ventures.