



Social and Economic Education for Development

Addressing Difficult Public Choices: Charting A Community's Future Direction

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A democracy is a partnership between citizens and their government. Alone, a government cannot chart future directions for public action nor set the standards by which its performance will be judged. Only citizens can establish the foundation of purpose, direction and accountability for a democratic government. In one sense, then, *public choices* must be made before the *politics of governing* -- electing officials, passing laws -- can be effective.

Politics requires that we make hard choices, choices that touch our most important values and beliefs. Making public choices is difficult; it is hard work. Making public choices requires us to understand the perspectives of others, the consequences of the choices before us, and the connections among issues. Making public choices asks us to deliberate over what we as a public value and do not value; to consider the consequences of the choices open to us; to recognize the tension between the values underlying our choices; and, to reach a shared understanding and appreciation of what is important to us. Making public choices also involves recognizing that every alternative will have both costs and benefits and, will require us to make trade-offs that may leave us feeling uncomfortable.

Citizen deliberation over public choices leads to finding common ground for public action. We develop a sense of common purpose, and a range of actions most citizens will support. Successful communities are built as citizens deliberating about public choices. Through community discussions we give public direction to our government's decisions so they are guided by a common purpose and in a direction that reflects a common vision of tomorrow.

Strategic planning -- whether for economic development, tourism, land use or whatever purpose -- is about making public choices. When we plan to do some project we are making a choice to not do something else. When a community establishes a capital improvements plan that specifies where public funds will be invested to build new sewer lines in the next ten years, it is saying that those monies will not be used for some other purpose and that one geographic area of the community will be getting sewers but other areas will not. These are difficult public choices. But successful communities deliberate over choices and select alternatives that will produce the best outcomes for the total community based on clearly stated principles that underlie how citizens define the "best" outcomes. Communities that fail to make public choices find themselves spinning their wheels -- always responding to the crises of the moment -- rather than taking the strategic actions that will enable them to build their own future.

A vision for the future, public deliberation, identified community values and principles, public choices, strategic planning. These are the building blocks of successful communities.
