

MAP 150 Evaluation Report

MAP 150 DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS

Long-term care demonstration project
Students Speak Out demonstration project
Property tax demonstration project
Redistricting demonstration project

February 2009

MAP 150 is a series of exploratory projects administered by the Citizens League for the purpose of learning how (if) citizens can be involved more authentically in the development of public policy. The context for the project is well described in other reports (see especially MAP 150 Final Project Report, October, 2008). In short, however, the context is this -- the literature plus interviews conducted by the Citizens League with citizens of Minnesota in the summer of 2006 combined to show:

1. Citizens can be passionate about public issues.
2. Citizens feel left out of the policy-making process.
3. Rather than expend resources trying to have an effect, citizens turn away from public policy pursuits and toward other processes or activities that will provide them with more perceived benefits.

This would be okay if not for two things:

1. Exclusionary policy-development processes are contraindicated by the principles of our democracy.
2. Citizens have significant expertise for solving problems, without which policies are less effective and our society functions less well.

The MAP 150 exploratory projects were conceived and administered in order to discover what weight policy-development processes themselves must bear in closing citizens out of policy development and how policy-development processes might be changed to make citizen input more authentic.

MAP 150 consisted of four exploratory projects. Three were completed and have been evaluated for this report. (The fourth is ongoing. A brief summary of things learned is included herein.)

The overall MAP 150 evaluation also included a survey of public officials and of citizens regarding their perceptions of public policy development processes and a review of the literature on citizen-involvement in policy development. Results from the survey and from the literature are described in companion documents. This report is focused solely on lessons learned from the demonstration projects.

EVALUATION QUESTIONS

From the Citizens League RFP:

- (1) Did the project attract the intended participation – number, breadth, retention, satisfaction?
- (2) Did the project produce solutions – development of a common language, consensus building, new insights, support for implementation, recast citizen/institutional roles?
- (3) Is the process self-sustaining – how much support is required, does it attract participation on its own, does it lead to the involvement of new persons?
- (4) Can the process be replicated elsewhere – what general principles or tools can be borrowed by others, what resources are required?

From the Citizens League process criteria:

- (5) *Inclusive* People who are affected by a problem should be included in defining the problem.
- (6) *Transparent* Leaders should establish a transparent process that expects all participants to engage in policy and decision-making.
- (7) *Engagement* All participants should be engaged in the process through the contribution of resources to solve the problem.
- (8) *Accountability* All participants are accountable for helping to implement and sustain outcomes insofar as they have authority and influence to act.

In the current evaluation framework, those questions are combined as:

- Outcomes
 - Effects on participation (1)
 - Effects on policy or official actions (2)
- Process replicability
 - Sustainability factors (3)
 - Environmental factors (4)
- Inclusion (5)
- Transparency (6)
- Engagement (7)
- Accountability (8)

THE PROJECTS

Each of the demonstration projects was successful in terms of generating some positive outcomes as well as lessons learned. And, most of the lessons learned were of the “this is how to make the process more effective” type of lesson rather than of the “now we see why this can never work” type of lesson.

Long-term Care

The long-term care demonstration project tested the effectiveness of bringing diverse audiences together face-to-face over a two-day period in a roundtable discussion format. Participants included 24 healthcare professionals, public officials, direct-care givers and direct-care receivers. The group was split into three sub-groups. Each sub-group had the assignment of dealing with a specific problem in long-term care policy and arriving at ideas that could be put forward to the appropriate bodies as policy or public process enhancements. The policy areas for the three roundtables respectively were defined generally as senior-friendly communities, public financing and home-based care.

Following the long-term care demonstration project, each participant returned a survey giving their thoughts on the effectiveness of the process. A follow-up focus group was conducted with direct-care receivers who had participated in the project.

Through the long-term care demonstration project, MAP 150 showed:

- Citizens require ongoing dialogue with decision makers in order to believe their involvement is authentic.

Even with a smaller group than was involved in the other two demonstration projects, the following observations were made:

- Citizen perspective on problems is from a unique point-of-view and useful in defining the problem that needs to be solved.
- The expertise that public officials have in policy-development processes is valuable to citizens who want to engage change processes.
- In the opinion of project participants, putting end-users, experts and policy developers together in face-to-face discussions is a superior policy development process when compared to a standard hearing-and-legislation process.

Citizens require ongoing dialogue with decision makers in order to believe their involvement is authentic.

The follow-up focus group with senior citizens who had participated in the long-term care demonstration project addressed questions about how those who received long-term care felt about having been involved in this demonstration project.

Survey responses from long-term care receivers, showed that this group of participants thought they had contributed to the policy-development efforts of the demonstration project (“I think my participation in the workshop made a valuable contribution to the results” – two-thirds of the long-term care receivers agreed). The focus group was convened approximately three weeks after the conclusion of the roundtables and, by that time, their beliefs had changed. All focus

group participants had participated in the roundtables, and they said they were not sure their participation had mattered.

When confronted with the survey responses in which two-thirds of them had ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that their participation was valuable, the group said their perceptions changed when they heard nothing after the roundtables from anyone involved in the process. One participant summed up the beliefs of the group: “At first I thought this was great, but now I think it was just business as usual. This time we got treated nicer but nobody really cared or they would have let us know what’s going on next.” The group went on then to ask the focus group facilitator, “What IS going to happen next? Do you know who is receiving the results of our work in those discussions?” Being involved in – or at least connected to follow-up activities – was a capstone without which the authenticity of the overall process was diluted for this group of citizen participants.

Focus group participants said they did not expect there would be any policy or other effects from the roundtables within such a short period of time, but they had expected to know what the next steps were – who was going to receive the information they had generated and what decisions could come from it. In short, they expected transparency.

The group was asked if they would participate in a similar process or if they would recommend it to their friends. All said they would recommend it to their friends. All-but-two said they would do it again.

The next question put to the group was, with so much frustration about the apparent end of the dialogue, why would you go again. Immediately, several respondents laughed and said “the food.” They appeared to be only partly joking. As they continued in their discussion, they made it clear that they had participated thinking they were at the beginning of a dialogue. They voiced the realization that not all of their concerns would be met or all of their problems solved, but they thought the process they initiated would be communicated and transparent to them when the roundtable discussions were complete. But without that dialogue, what the process meant to them in retrospect was getting out of their apartments for a day or two and being treated well.

As has been noted in the review of literature – and as will be seen in other projects described in this report – many citizens are perceived by many public officials to care only about achieving the policy outcomes they want personally, but this is a grossly oversimplified perception of what citizens appear to actually want. They appear more to want a dialogue and they want the policy-development process to be communicated to them and they want it to be transparent. What these seniors wanted was to see their words given meaning by being used after they were uttered at the roundtables and their time to be respected by being kept informed about the progress of the process they thought they had helped to start.

Citizen perspective on problems is unique and citizen input may be valued for this point-of-view even when it does not add substantive expertise.

The expertise that public officials have in policy-development processes is valuable to citizens who want to engage change processes.

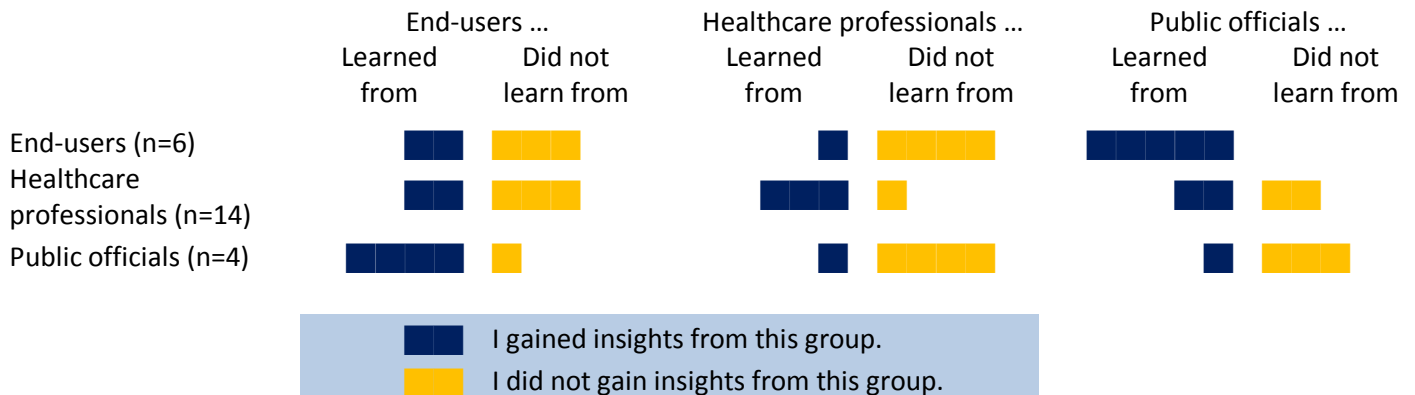
The survey at the end of the project asked participants who they learned the most from. Responses from public official’s, healthcare professionals and end-uses (care givers and receivers combined) were compared to each other.

The participants who said they had “gained new insights” most frequently were those who identified themselves as public officials. The group they had learned from most often was end-users.

Chart 2 shows that public officials were most likely to report gaining insights from end-users. End-users, conversely, reported gaining most of their insights from public officials – the group with the clearest understanding of how to change public policy. Healthcare professionals gained most of their insights from each other.

Chart 2
INSIGHTS GAINED

(The bar shows percent of respondents. Blue plus gold in each pair equals 100 percent.)



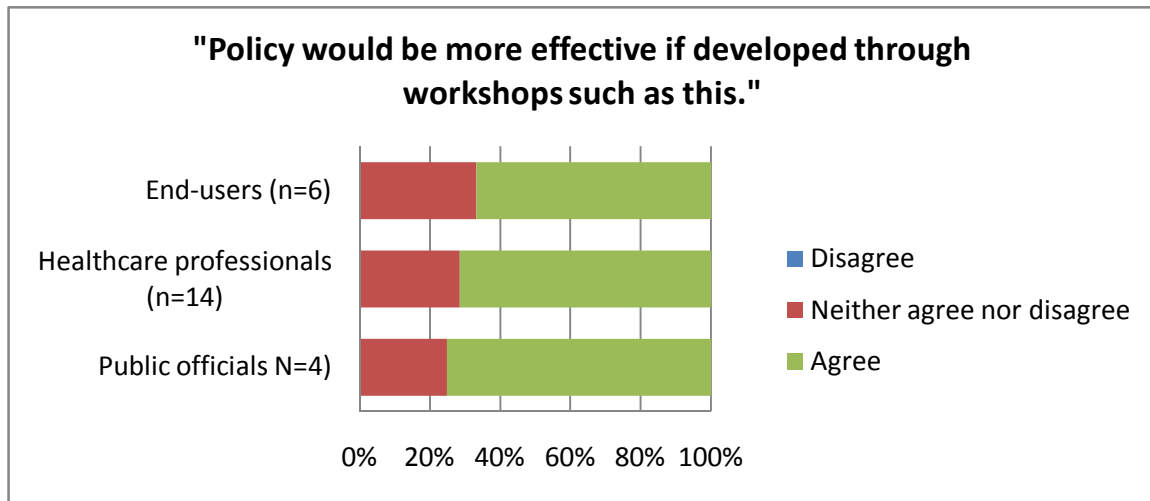
With such a small group, we cannot generalize, but it is still noticeable that in the highly complex issue of long-term care, content expertise was not the knowledge that was prized by either the end-users or the public officials. What public officials may have valued, was the perspective on defining the problem brought to the table by end-users. What end-users may have valued, was the perspective on how to get to a solution brought to the table by the public officials. Both groups, evidently, believed they knew enough already about the substance of the issue.

This is a useful perspective for all audiences to understand when dealing with complicated or highly technical public policy issues. The literature indicates than on issues of highly technical public policy, citizen input may be less useful. In the complicated realm of long-term healthcare – an area in which “experts” were most willing to be involved and were easiest to recruit – it was the citizens and the public officials who learned the most from each other.

In the opinions of project participants, putting end-users, experts and policy developers together in face-to-face discussions is a superior policy development process when compared to a standard hearing-and-legislation process.

One of the survey items to which project participants responded at the end of the process was, "Policy would be more effective if developed through workshops such as this than if developed via current political processes including formal hearings and public meetings." Chart 3 shows the proportion of each group that agreed with this survey item.

Chart 3



Note that among all three types of project participants, there were none disagreeing that the roundtable format would produce including public officials, end-users and healthcare professionals would result in more effective policy. A third or fewer of each small group had no opinion.

What are the lessons for the Citizens League?

- Facilitating dialogue between officials or experts and citizens after citizens have given their input in the policy-development process is critical to overall process credibility. When citizens are involved at the beginning and see nothing happen afterwards, the process is perceived as symbolic "business as usual." Finding an efficient process, however, to effectively continue the dialogue will increase process credibility and citizen perceptions of the authenticity of their involvement.
- Even in complex issues, public officials and citizens need each other. Citizens are valuable for how they define problems. Public officials are valuable for their knowledge of how change might be managed.
- Regardless of position, once involved in an alternative method of policy development, content experts, citizens and public officials see value in the outcomes. Policy content (e.g., education, healthcare, environment) is the area in which research is usually conducted. Research into new methods is also valuable.

Students Speak Out

Students Speak Out, tested the viability of social networking as part of an input process for public policy. It showed that well-managed social networking tools may be effectively used as components of a process to help public decision makers develop policy.

Through Students Speak Out, MAP 150 showed that:

- Respect for citizen knowledge can grow during an authentic citizen-involvement process. Believing that citizens can help solve problems will make it easier to initiate citizen-involvement processes but organizers should not think that citizen credibility with officials is a prerequisite for developing a useful citizen-involvement process.
- Process sustainability is positively affected by dialogue. Citizens will stay involved in an authentic dialogue without evidence of direct policy impact.
- Someone in a citizen-input process must accept responsibility for managing the distribution of information which the process generates and for funneling feedback or other substantive policy information back into the process. That information is “useful” to someone is not sufficient to insure that the information will be “used.”
- Managing expectations of public officials before initiating public-input processes may result in processes that are more beneficial and sustainable.
- When public officials are involved in *authentic* public-input processes, many public officials begin to believe that citizen-input is useful for helping to define a problem and for finding effective solutions.

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Students Speak Out face some “bumps in the road” at its beginning.

- Some parents objected to school policy being affected by student input.
- Some officials who initiated dialogues would not follow up in the dialogue or participate in an ongoing way.
- On at least once occasion, an official refused to identify his source of information about how to increase the effectiveness of technology in the classroom because he thought his colleagues would not accept information from students as credible.

Students Speak Out overcame these credibility barriers. Currently, Students Speak Out has more than 600 members in Minnesota and has generated:

- 13 issue briefs summarizing student conversations by topic
- 2 white papers on alternative schools and on bullying respectively
- Results of 2 surveys representing the thoughts of 74 Minneapolis school students on declining enrollment in the Minneapolis district and of 60 alternative school students representing their thoughts on their alternative school experiences
- Other aggregations of information that can affect policy such as 20 videos presenting ideas on school improvement and many discussion threads where students constructively discuss issues of the day in their school districts

A Students Speak Out site has been created in Milwaukee because of the success of the site in Minnesota. The Milwaukee site now has 333 members. Nashville, Chicago, Denver and West Virginia are considering establishing Students Speak Out sites.

Process sustainability is positively affected by dialogue. Citizens will stay involved in an authentic dialogue without evidence of policy impact.

A sampling of issues Students Speak Out has addressed includes school climate, use of technology in classrooms, the image of alternative schools, suspension/expulsion policies, school nutrition programs, and City of Minneapolis policies and processes regarding youth violence.

To date, insofar as we know, it has affected only two policies or practices. Content of workshops about bullying in Minneapolis schools has been enhanced by student input and criteria for eligibility for alternative schools in Minnesota may be changed. So, of these two effects, one has still not been realized although it is expected to be.

Much of the content for Students Speak Out has not affected policy **but it is all authentically received** by decision makers. Students, therefore, persist. Students have shown how citizens who are authentically involved in public processes grow in their knowledge about policy issues and begin to interpret their own policy understandings in a larger context.

A citizen-input process must have a manager who accepts responsibility for managing the distribution of information which the process generates.

Students Speak out has not achieved its outcomes organically. That is, the process per se cannot be credited with generating reports and affecting policy or activities. Students Speak Out benefits from aggressive, timely management.

Does it matter whether these examples of Students Speak Out effectiveness were the result of the process management or of the process per se? Yes. A purpose of MAP 150 was to find processes that will authentically involve citizens and lead to better policies and a more inclusive democracy. Therefore, if a process appears to help in succeeding with these goals, it is important to know whether that process can be plopped out there and be expected to work or if it requires management and how the management resources should be allocated.

It was through Students Speak Out that the MAP 150 evaluation process identified the role of someone we began to refer to as an “information shepherd.”

One Students Speak Out dialogue provided evidence of needs which could be used to support proposals for one official’s organization’s requests for grants. This particular leader was involved in the Students Speak Out dialogue after posting questions, yet, until the data supporting needs defined in her proposals was organized and pointed out to her, she had missed it.

The leader of the Students Speak Out demonstration project stayed in the stream of the information and knew enough about the needs of her audience that she was able to see data, package for a specific purpose and deliver it. This role of shepherding information enhanced the

authenticity of Students Speak Out as a public-input process. Evidence in support of the need for this role was also evidenced in other MAP 150 demonstration projects.

Managing expectations of public officials before initiating public-input processes may result in processes that are more beneficial and sustainable.

Two incidents in the first half-year of Students Speak Out illuminated the need to train public officials in its use.

- The leader of a Twin Cities nonprofit who agreed to participate in Students Speak Out, when asked about the value of the information he received from the Students Speak Out dialogue, responded, “In all honesty, I don’t know. I haven’t been back on the site since I posted my question.”
- Another adult leader who posted a question and participated in the dialogue said in a follow-up interview about his Students Speak Out experience that as the dialogue evolved he began using it as an “opportunity to teach students about real life” and that he was disappointed when participation seemed to deteriorate after that.

As evidenced in the literature, the use of authentic citizen-input processes is not (will not be) automatic. Everyone has expectations or habits that will have to be unlearned. In the examples above, when left to their own devices, without instruction, public officials started a dialogue in which they did not participate, received useful policy-development information which they did not see and changed their role from one of participant to teacher (one of the flaws the literature says public officials make in citizen-input processes) only to see the process end.

The Citizens League, when attempting to move from passive to authentic processes, will have to consider what kind of training those who administer the process need in order for policy to benefit and the process to be robust.

Public officials who are involved in authentic public-input processes value them.

In follow-up interviews of six public officials who initiated dialogues, five said they would be involved in future Students Speak Out dialogues. One said he would not but he would recommend it to others. [Note: The one who said he would likely not be involved in the future was a retired public official who simply said he did not expect to have future needs but, that if someone else asked him if the process was worth the resources required to engage it, he said he would recommend it highly.]

As further evidence of value to public officials of the Students Speak Out dialogue, the mayor of Minneapolis chose Students Speak Out and initiated his own dialogue about violence in Minneapolis. This dialogue is ongoing and any policy or other impacts are not currently known.

Will a forum such as SSO help cultivate students who care about and become involved in public processes as responsible citizens when they are adults? It may. Many students sustained their involvement in SSO and interviews with those students showed a level of excitement about their engagement with adults involved in school policy. The students were realists. The level of engagement mattered to them more than the policy outcome. They were not discouraged by the slow pace of policy development or by the preconceived notions that some adults had about student involvement in the policy discussion process.

We do not yet know if a forum like SSO will affect policy. We do know that useful information can go unnoticed through a forum such as SSO. Remember that early in the implementation of SSO, an official asked a question of the student members, which resulted in information that could be used to define needs that could be used to raise money for programs –but this information went unnoticed until organized and highlighted by a process administrator. Although only one example, this shows that a decision-maker can engage the SSO process but not be affected by it.

What are the lessons for the Citizens League?

- Use of electronic process can be helpful in policy development.
- Effective facilitation of a citizen-input process is not only helpful, it may be absolutely necessary if a process is to have impact. In the case of SSO, some officials asked a question and were then passive about the dialogue their questions generated. Others asked questions and got involved in the dialogue. Dialogues in which officials stayed involved led to more effective information being shared and to a more sustainable discussion.
- Another tool to combat the barrier of passive habits on the part of officials – supported by the literature – is training in the nature and use of an authentic dialogue.
- While process transparency is an ideal of the Citizens League, the experience of one MPS school board member, shows a side-effect of transparency that has to be managed. If citizens involved in a citizen-input process do not inherently have credibility with their audience but they do have useful information, transparency about the source can be perceived to dilute the power of the information – no matter how useful.

Credibility is more than knowledge combined with trustworthiness. Credibility can be constrained by the eye of the beholder. If an audience does not respect a source of information – no matter how accurate – then when that source adds value to a discussion, that information will require some special management to be used.

What should be done when citizens are trustworthy and knowledgeable but not perceived as valuable for the information they offer to a policy discussion?

Students Speak Out overcame this problem because they had a champion – an information shepherd -- who understood the needs of the audience well and how the information from the students could be used to improve policy or practice. That champion must also take responsibility for communicating citizen information to the appropriate audiences. In the words of one of the officials who engaged in a Students Speak Out dialogue, “I participated because I was asked to but I was pretty passive. [The process manager] had to point out to me how I could use what the students were saying and she had to do it in very specific terms. You might say she communicated with a rifle, not a shotgun. Her message was not scattered at all but was very specific, targeted on a need that [the process manager] knew that I had.]

In this example from Students Speak Out, although the students were knowledgeable, their credibility had to be established by an external source. Until credibility of citizens as a source is established, identification of the source may dilute the power of the

process. It is a surmountable problem. Anticipating and preparing for it will help to overcome problems of source credibility more quickly.

- Target a sub-group of the overall audience to receive the message.
- Manage them in the use of the information.
- Follow-through in supporting their application of it.

Property tax

The property tax demonstration project convened discussion groups of county officials and citizens in Morrison, Ramsey and Washington Counties. Each group met three times in its respective county to discuss issues related to how county officials communicated with citizens regarding how property taxes are set and allocated. Most of this communication is regulated and results in the Truth in Taxation statements that counties send to residents annually.

The purposes of each of the three meetings in each county were:

Meeting 1 - To discuss what information citizens would like to receive about their property taxes

Meeting 2 - To provide answers to citizens' questions, to the best extent possible, and other general information that may be helpful.

Meeting 3 - To discuss what information should be provided to the general citizenry and in what formats

Ultimately the goal of the property tax demonstration project was to develop "a useful tool and/or policy change that can help citizens make sense of property tax issues and hopefully, make the TNT [truth in taxation] process more efficient and meaningful."

The discussion groups resulted in a website that was developed the week before many school referenda were conducted. The website presented, simply, charts showing trends in property tax allocations in all school districts holding referenda. So, the website, was a solution to an issue citizens raised but it also became another test within the demonstration project – to see if information about property taxes could be communicated accurately and meaningfully to citizens.

Through the property tax demonstration project, MAP 150 showed that:

- Citizen input is useful (perhaps required) in defining the policy or administrative practice that is being addressed
- Citizens understand issues that public officials may consider too complicated for citizens to be involved with
- The absence of the role of the information shepherd can lead to public official and to citizen frustration
- Feedback may be required for process sustainability
- Public officials will respond positively to redefinition of policy or practice issues and seek to respond positively to citizen concerns or needs

Citizen input is useful (perhaps required) in defining the policy issue to solve

For two reasons, some public officials resisted participation in this demonstration project. Schedule and content for property tax communication is regulated and public officials are not free to make some changes they feared citizens might recommend. Also, how property taxes are set and used is complicated. Some of it is determined legislatively while some of it is determined by referendum. So, in fact, there is a lot about how property taxes are set and allocated that is unknown. It's not secret; it's just communicated ineffectively. It is communicated by the Truth

in Taxation statements which, during the course of this demonstration project, many participating citizens said they did not read.

Because of citizen input in the demonstration projects, the issue of communication about property taxes was changed from one of meeting regulations to one of communicating relevant information that regulations neither require nor prohibit. Essentially, what citizens said is that the required communications did not address an issue that was relevant to them. They redefined relevant – and the subsequent website demonstrated how easily and effectively the most relevant property tax communication issue could be addressed.

Yet, without citizen involvement, public officials would have continued to meet regulations which are intended to promote transparency, yet which do not deal with concerns that citizens consider relevant.

Citizens understand issues that public officials may consider too complicated

Citizens who used the website were surveyed about the usefulness of the website. Responses were received from 162 people. The survey included questions about whether the website had presented any new, useful or influential information and, if so, what information was most useful.

Table 1 shows how many website visitors thought the information was useful and comprehensible.

How much did you learn from the information presented?		
Amount learned	Number of respondents	Percent
Lots	41	25%
Some	95	59%
Little or none	26	16%

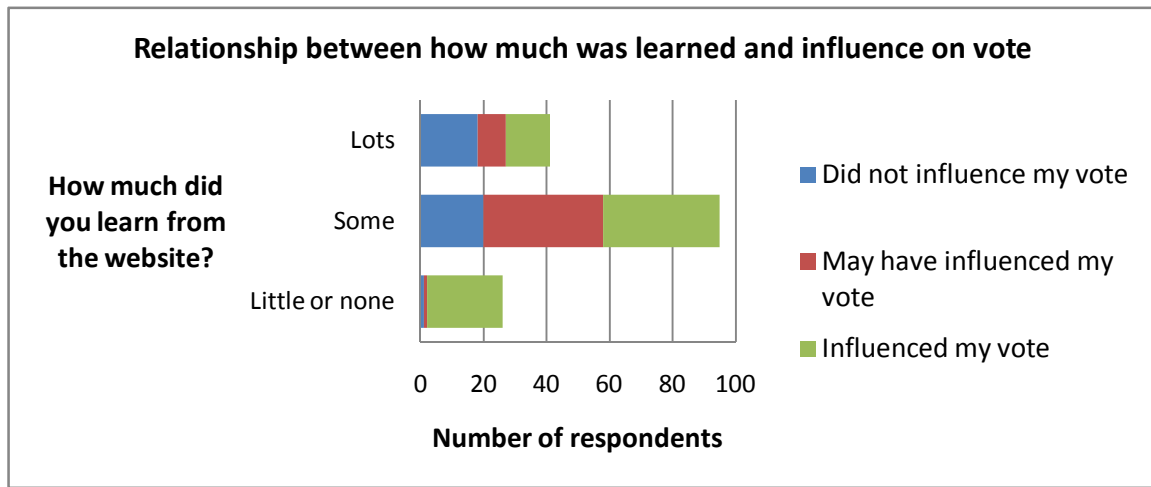
Citizens redefined the issue regarding property tax communication and then evaluated the solution and improved it with feedback such as:

- I understand why you did not include data about special education funding but, since it is often the misperception that money for special education "comes out of" the general education budget, it might be helpful to include data that more precisely details the pathways by which special education is funded.
- It would be interesting to have a note that shows how a "typical" district ... if there is such a thing ... might have a significant variation in terms of inflationary costs vs. the CPI.
- The data you provide is absolutely wonderful! Thank you very much. I have spent many countless hours trying to find certain things and your site answered many questions in about 3 minutes! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! I am going to add a link to [a website to direct others to this information].

The literature points out that one barrier to more authentic citizen involvement is a perception by some public officials that, even when informed, citizens never change their minds or veer from their agendas.

Chart 1 shows, however, that citizens who learned new information from the website **may** have changed their opinions as a result of what they learned. (The survey about the website information did not ask citizens if they would change how they were voting as a result of what they learned. It asked, simply, if they had been “influenced.” The “influence” may have been to strengthen their conviction that they were right all along. But we note that, of those who said they had learned “some” or “lots” from the website information, two-in-three persons said the information had been influential.

Chart 1



The absence of the role of the information shepherd can lead to public official and to citizen frustration

At the meeting of county officials held to debrief the discussion groups, an official from Washington County asked what was to happen next. She had attended the discussion groups, found the information to be useful and wanted to see it applied to making changes in Washington County. There was no path for application of what had been learned, however, and she exhibited frustration about this.

This citizen input process, without assigning responsibility to someone to organize the information, compare it to what the regulations would permit and what they would not permit, and to direct officials in how to apply it – languished. Change processes, which is what new citizen-input processes are all about, must have standard effective implementation practices built into them. It is insufficient to authentically involve citizens – which this process did – and then not insure that information gets to the parts of the system that can utilize and for change. This part of new citizen-input processes must be as intentionally designed as the front end is.

Feedback may be required for process sustainability

There is a common aphorism among professional evaluators that, “The only thing you can say about missing information is that it is missing.” That is, an evaluator should not assume that he knows the reasons people will not respond to a survey or not participate in an information-gathering process. An unusual thing happened, however, among discussion group participants

from this demonstration project when each one was contacted six months after the project was completed.

In order to assess the sustainability of the effects of this demonstration project, surveys were e-mailed to all participants six months after the conclusion of the third discussion group asking participants if they felt their participation had been meaningful and would they participate in such a process again. Only 2 of 14 were returned.

Yes, survey response rates can be quite low. In this case, however, simply based on the experience of the project evaluator, a return rate of 1-in-7 was unusual. This was a survey sent to a small group of people who had worked together for a common purpose over a period of weeks. A return of 5 to 8 responses could have been legitimately expected. We cannot impute anything from such a low response rate, but we must note it. Moreover, the two who responded both said they were glad to have been involved but that they would be unlikely to do it again because, although they had learned a lot, they didn't think anything had changed.

Again, we cannot confirm that we "know" anything based on an unusually low response rate in a small-group setting, we note simply that it is unusual and that the two responses received were unenthusiastic about the follow-up – unenthusiastic to the point where it quelled their desire to continue their involvement.

This is not a condemnation of a process that citizens and public officials responded well to during its implementation. Along with the frustration of the official from Washington County, this response simply supports the need for the role of a person to shepherd information generated by citizen-input processes to places where it can be utilized and where it can authenticate the efforts of the citizens who were involved.

Public officials will respond positively to redefinition of policy or practice issues and seek to respond positively to citizen concerns or needs

The silver lining in the frustration of the official from Washington County is that she exemplifies a desire – not just a willingness – to respond to issues as citizens redefine them. The literature and this example support the notion that public officials will use input from authentic processes.

Lessons for the Citizens League

- Use of electronic processes can be helpful in policy development.
- Public officials will be partners in citizen input processes and help to authenticate them.
- For sustainability, concern about the downstream disposition of information from the property tax groups must be addressed. That is when citizens participating in the Morrison, Ramsey and Washington County property tax groups were asked for input but then saw no use of the information by their county administrators or received no follow-up dialogue, they dropped out.

Citizens must perceive a reaction to their information. This does not mean they must "get their way" or even that their input must affect policy – but it must be honored in transparent, non-symbolic dialogue. The citizen need to see the ultimate use or effects of their input must be addressed. To do this, a process for use of the information should be

considered as a natural follow-on to the input process itself and the follow-on process should be implemented transparently.

Why is transparency important relative to the follow-on process? The literature and results from Student Speak Out both show that utilization of information in policy development is not necessary to authenticate citizen involvement. Dialogue is. Visible downstream disposition of information from these discussion groups may have been sufficient to motivate citizens to be involved in a repeat of this process.

Re-districting

As part of a Humphrey Institute project to reform redistricting in Minnesota, the Citizens League organized and executed a complementary citizen-directed effort aimed at reforming the procedures for redistricting. The goal was to involve citizens in a discussion about redistricting reform, demonstrating that if involvement opportunities were meaningful and engaging, citizens would participate in important policy subjects that may be otherwise not gain much attention.

The objectives of this demonstration project were to:

1. Raise awareness about the importance and implications of redistricting procedures for democracy.
2. Provide a platform for citizens to weigh in on how redistricting should be done and/or the values and outcomes that should be given priority in redistricting.
3. Foster the creation of a citizen-backed view of redistricting that can help influence reform proposals.

Re-districting is a process that politicians, academics and public officials guard from public input much more aggressively than the other MAP 150 projects. Power is associated, after all, more with how a congressional or legislative district is formed than it is with policy on schools, long-term care or property taxes.

MAP 150 could not gain entrée to the re-districting process as much as wished. A complementary process, however, was established.

The complementary process consisted of two processes: 1) interviews with some of the major policy-makers in Minnesota's redistricting process and 2) polling of citizens in a variety of venues.

During the winter and spring of 2008, interviews were conducted with:

- Elizabeth Brama, counsel to the 2002 judicial panel charged with redistricting
- Joan Growe, former Secretary of State
- Roger Moe, former Senate Majority Leader
- Al Quie, former Governor

(The interviews were videotaped and are available through the Citizens League.)

Consistent with the literature on citizen involvement and with the other demonstration projects public officials are not always clear on citizens' priorities. Elizabeth Brama stressed the helpfulness of public input when drawing the map in 2002, yet there is not a set process for citizen involvement. These interviews illustrated the complexity of the process and underscored the need for meaningful public involvement during the next redistricting cycle.

Citizens were polled in venues ranging from the State Fair to the Citizens League annual meeting to a variety of Minnesota businesses. Polls were conducted through electronic, interactive polling or through application of online surveys as befit the respective venue.

At the time of this report, results of the interviews and the polling have been reported to appropriate officials but there are no data regarding whether citizens felt they were involved meaningfully or on the sustainability of the process.

The re-districting project does, however, support findings from the other demonstration projects that citizen input is useful in re-defining problems that policies address and that meaningful interaction between citizens and public officials requires that public officials be educated in how to manage the process.

SUMMARY

An unspoken question that the MAP 150 demonstration projects were designed to answer might be stated as, “Are citizens not involved in public policy because they are apathetic, as we are often told, or are the processes just not designed to encourage citizen involvement?” Students Speak Out, the long-term care project and the property tax project were all received enthusiastically by citizens. And when queried, participating citizens said they learned more about policy development and that having access to officials who made decisions was useful.

We also saw that when there was no communication about an issue after a demonstration project concluded, citizens returned to being passive.

A dearth of authentic dialogue and follow-up may bear more responsibility for lack of citizen involvement than a perceived inability to affect issues does. When citizens cannot affect an issue – much of the property issue was defined by legal codes and most of the decisions had already been made – they may still respond enthusiastically to being involved but they must see evidence that their time was taken seriously. One way to demonstrate this is through dialogue and feedback loops.

There is an administrative burden in facilitating all of the dialogue and feedback that may be required to keep citizens authentically involved. In Students Speak Out, this role was fulfilled by what we came to call an “information shepherd.” This was a person who kept track of the dialogue and reported usefully packaged messages to specific audiences. Obviously, this is a role that could be guilty of “spinning” the information, but in Students Speak Out it was fulfilled for the sincere desire of highlighting parts of the dialogue, communicating them to where they could have an application and by getting back to the citizens and letting them know how their information was being applied. It was a lot of work, but the result was a sustainable process with growing credibility.

Citizens are useful in defining the issues that have to be solved. In the property tax demonstration project, county officials began with the assumption that citizens wanted everything required in the Truth in Taxation document. Citizens redefined the problem that county officials needed to solve by saying, “All we need to know is . . .” In Students Speak Out, citizens redefined the issue of schoolyard bullying so that it could be addressed in teacher in-services. Students Speak Out also had an effect on how alternative schools are presented to the public because citizens redefined the need.

Finally, MAP 150 showed that public officials will respond positively to authentic citizen-involvement and use citizen input appropriately.