

To: Dan Harbaugh, TWSA Executive Director
From: Loran M. Posey, Jr.
Date: April 16, 2019
Subject: New Collaborative Efforts on Whittier Sewer Project

MEMORANDUM

Introduction

The collaboration that led to the Whittier Sewer Project has weakened and the project is not sustainable without more customers. In order to find and implement a solution, the collaborative partnership which previously yielded so much success must be rebuilt.

Background & Context

Renewed Collaboration Needed

The Whittier Sewer Project is a financial burden on the Tuckaseegee Water & Sewer Authority (TWSA) due to significant operating losses caused by an insufficient number of customers. However, unilateral action like raising rates and expanding service areas without consulting partners would risk further damage to those relationships. A key partner—Jackson County—has new commissioners who are not as supportive of the project and would be less likely to support a hook-up mandate. They have an obligation to the public to be responsive given the public's recent electoral claims (Benington & Moore 2011). Therefore, unilateral or immediate action is not feasible.

Citizens do not want government agencies narrowly focused on achieving their individual missions, but a “networked government” in which different levels and agencies within government work together to provide services in a coordinated way (Benington & Moore 2011). If the goal of all partners is to maximize public legitimacy and support of government actions then the partners should unite as a team, jointly creating commonly desired public value outcomes (Benington & Moore 2011).

The nature of collaboration yields a repetitive cycle of negotiation, commitment, and execution (Thomson & Perry 2006). This cyclical process has been observed throughout the development of the Whittier Sewer Project, but the collaborative partnership among stakeholders has weakened and the full group has not convened in a substantial period of time. Due to the urgency and magnitude of the challenges the project faces, collaboration and negotiation should be occurring among stakeholders.

Importance of Social Coordination

Collaboration among many entities tends to be decentralized, which fosters a sense of equality and mutuality, but this produces the need for social coordination or a central position for communication and organization (Freitag and Winkler 2001). Fred Gibson, retired Executive Director of the Southwestern Regional Authority (SRA), previously filled this role and has agreed to help facilitate in an informal role.

Building Trust and Collaborative Inertia

In addition to leadership changes in Jackson County, the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians (EBCI), TWSA, and SRA all are under new leadership. Because of this, along with difficulties in recent years, both personal and institutional relationships have been weakened. Collective action depends on reciprocity, trust, and reputation (Ostrom 1998). The goal is for the group to move to a longer term commitments based on personal and interorganizational relationships so that it can hold together long enough to establish project sustainability (Ring & Van de Ven 1994). Trust is a faster way to remove complexity and transaction costs among partners (Chiles & McMackin 1996; Ostrom 1998; Smith 1995).

An effective way to begin rebuilding that trust among partners is to focus on achieving small, collective successes (Thomson & Perry 2006). The chances that a partner will withdraw from the relationship will be lower if the group finds short-term success (Thomson 1999) and it will establish positive collaborative inertia (Huxham 1996) to move forward on the larger issues facing the project.

Summary & Discussion

Recommendation 1: Establishment of a New Working Group

Given the importance of networked governance and the cyclical nature of collaboration mentioned earlier, a new working group should be convened. This group should aim to strengthen pre-existing relationships and begin new relationships with key stakeholders not included in the initial working group. The purpose of this action is to solve the sustainability issue for the project through multilateral collaboration and jointly determined outcomes. The group should include: (1) Whittier Sanitary District, (2) Church of God, (3) EBCI, (4) Jackson County, (5) EDC, (6) TWSA and (7) Southwestern Regional Authority.

Recommendation 2: Fred Gibson as Social Coordinator

This collaborative effort should be initiated by TWSA as the entity charged with managing the project, but should be facilitated by retired SRA executive director Fred Gibson. This recommendation is rooted in the necessity of a social coordinator (mentioned earlier) and Gibson's ability and willingness to facilitate.

Recommendation 3: Focus on Small Successes First

The initial focus of the group should not be to solve the issue of revenue and losses. Relationships have been fractured and there is a need to rebuild trust before expecting actors to contribute significant financial resources toward a solution to a complex problem. The group should focus on smaller successes to gain momentum and build collaborative inertia. As described in the Background, the trust that develops through collective successes gives a group a better chance of remaining together as they move on to more complex problems.

Closing

This careful approach will lead to opportunities for losses to be shared by partners and solutions to be jointly designed and implemented. Before these achievements are possible, however, the collaborative partnership must first be renewed and rebuilt so that the many can come together in pursuit of solutions that go beyond the limited vision of each entity (Gray 1989).

Works Cited

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