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Inherent in the People: How Alaskans Decide What's Important, What's Not and What to Do About It.



Kenneth M. Osterkamp, Ph.D., is the principal and owner of 907 Media LLC in Anchorage, Alaska: www.907media.us. This article originally appeared as a chapter in *Alaska at 50: The Past, Present, and Future of Alaska Statehood*, published October 2009 by the Alaska Humanities Forum.

All political power is inherent in the people. All government originates with the people, is founded on their will only, and is instituted solely for the good of the people as a whole.
– Alaska Constitution, Article 1, Section 2

As I write this in my downtown Anchorage home, history is all around me. The house itself was built in 1952, three years before the fifty-five delegates to Alaska's constitutional convention were gaveled into order at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

I am the second owner. The original owners were the family of State Representative Russ Meekins, active participants over multiple generations in the civic life of the Last Frontier. They have wonderful, yellowed photographs of then-Senator Ernest Gruening at a barbeque in the back yard. The camera was snapping to immortalize his triumphant return earlier that day from Washington, DC, where he had just secured Alaska's statehood.

As territorial residents Alaskans lacked the ability to determine their own destiny, but statehood gave us that leverage. Alaskans passionately sought statehood, as the preamble to our constitution reminds us, "to secure and transmit to succeeding generations our heritage of political, civil, and religious liberty..."

Yet those liberties are not static things, to be won once and put on a shelf and passed down with the crystal and the china. Surely the men and women who collectively authored those words would agree with the early twentieth century philosopher, psychologist and educator John Dewey, who argued that this heritage is constantly contemporary:

"[E]very generation has to accomplish democracy over again for itself; ...its very nature, its essence, is something that cannot be handed on from one person or one generation to another, but has to be worked out in terms of needs, problems and conditions..."

In our relatively brief fifty years of statehood we Alaskans have established a rich history of accomplishing democracy. We have come together and pulled apart in dialogue, deliberation and debate. We have voted and volunteered our time and our treasure. We are educated, employed and engaged in our communities.

Were these efforts successful it would necessarily follow that our trust in public institutions is high, political leaders are respected, and such partisanship as exists is focused on legitimate differences in value-based approaches to solving public problems.

I think it fair to say that we live in an altogether different environment. This is not due simply to the recent spate of indictments and convictions of public officials. The data we have show that trust in public institutions and political leaders is near an all-time low nationwide, and there is no reason to suspect Alaskans view things any differently.

Much ink could be expended on the causes of the current situation. Leave that aside for the moment. The stakeholder theory of government maintains that an engaged public is a satisfied public. If we accept that civic engagement is a powerful antidote for lack of trust in public institutions and political leaders, and we recognize that public trust to be at a very low tide, then the question is begged: how meaningful and pervasive have efforts at civic engagement actually been?

The pervasive part is easy to answer. Alaska is a small state with extremes that reinforce our frontier status. Part of the frontier mentality is the sense of possibility, of being able to influence our destiny, not just individually but collectively. This outlook may account for our fecundity of civic engagement, which is a matter of record. The efficacy of these efforts is another question, but let's start with what we know.

Civic Engagement in Alaska 1959 to 1979

The Constitutional Convention (1955-56) provided a solid foundation of civic dialogue, but our citizens did not stand still. Immediately following statehood in 1959 there arose serious concerns, at least among some Alaskans, that our state was on shaky financial ground.

In the 1960s Alaskans slowly woke from the exciting dream of statehood to the daily tedium of governance. Budgets had to be balanced, and it was not clear by any means that the new state's narrow economic base could support much in the way of public expenditures.

By the end of the first full decade of statehood the situation had reversed itself with the discovery of oil in Prudhoe Bay. The September 1969 Prudhoe Bay lease sale brought in over \$900 million to the State, and the questions being asked were about how to manage the newfound wealth and the attendant opportunities for economic growth. As it turns out, the models of civic engagement established in the decade 1969 to 1979 were repeated to a great extent in the ensuing years.

To answer these questions "A Conference on the Future of Alaska" was convened in November 1969. The Conference was sponsored by the Legislative Council of the State of Alaska in association with the Brookings Institution of Washington, D.C. The roster of 157 participants reads like a who's who of Alaskans. The goal was grand: "a comprehensive policies plan to guide the direction of development of Alaska for the next decade."

The resulting findings covered seventeen topics ranging from Creative Arts and Education to Government and Industry, and pretty much everything in between. Ultimately, however, the promise did not deliver, and an informal history of the Conference by the Alaska Humanities Forum concluded, "Unfortunately few of the recommendations were followed and the legacy of the Brookings seminars is more of idea than of substance or policy."

The \$900 million fueled galloping growth in the state budget during the early 1970s, essentially unchecked as Alaskans anticipated new revenues issuing forth from our new genie lamp, the

Trans-Alaska Pipeline System. But completion was delayed, and boom turned into bust in the mid-1970s as the windfall evaporated and the fiscal gap between revenues and expenditures ballooned.

This is not to say there weren't some notable successes along the way. Alaska Natives in particular made good use of the black gold rush to form effective advocacy groups such as the Alaska Federation of Natives in 1966. The historic Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971 positioned Alaska Natives as powerful actors in the evolution of the Alaska political economy.

In the non-Native community traction was harder to find. An early effort was the Alaska Growth Policy Council, an eleven-member citizen's advisory group established by Governor Jay Hammond in 1975. Hammond intended the group to act as a public lobby to act as a counterweight to other special interests. Accordingly, the Council's portfolio spanned the entire social, economic and environmental policy spectrum. This reflected Hammond's preference for and promotion of citizen-led governance, capped off by his creation in 1976 of the Alaska Permanent Fund.

The Council's charter to solicit public preferences on these broad topics was supported by the state legislature, which in 1976 appropriated funds to create the Alaska Public Forum. From 1976 through 1978 the Forum embarked on an ambitious program of public engagement, convening over 70 public forums around the state involving more than 6,000 Alaskans.

The Council and the Forum divorced in 1978. The Council focused on policy analysis and in 1982 was transmogrified into the Governor's Council on Economic Policy, its component parts eventually absorbed into the cells of various executive branch organs. The Forum was likewise assimilated into the Division of Policy Development and Planning. It transitioned away from civic engagement to a mission of education, no less important but certainly much more constrained.

The Forum played an important part in the NANA Project from 1978 to 1979, when it attempted to give voice to the desires of the people of northwest Alaska and use that voice to inform state and federal activities in the region. In 1979 the Forum conducted an innovative series of televised and teleconferenced programs to inform and solicit public opinion on important topics of the day. Communities across Alaska were able to weigh in on such issues as offshore oil and gas leases and the allocation of state capital funds.

In 1979, ten years after the Conference on Alaska's Future, the Legislative Council convened a sequel: the Conference on Alaska's Future Frontiers, led by Senator George Hohman, Jr., and Representative Russ Meekins. 150 Alaskans met for three days in Anchorage, reading dozens of policy papers and producing, if not consensus, strong themes in the areas of respecting diversity and local control in all areas of public policy.

Civic Engagement in Alaska 1979 to 2009

Alaskans seemingly took a brief respite from civic engagement during the heydays of the 1980s to adjust to a new reality: high government spending, annual permanent fund dividend checks and the revocation of the state income tax being some of the more salient features.

There was still an awareness of the need to manage our newfound wealth, and the role of civic engagement in Alaska was picked up by public interest groups as like-minded citizens banded together. One such entity still extant is Commonwealth North, founded in 1979 by former Governors Wally Hickel and Bill Egan, which is focused primarily on economic issues. For thirty years Commonwealth North has been convening study groups and producing reports on topics like the permanent fund and the need for a long-term fiscal plan.

After the economic setbacks of the late 1980s, these topics took on more urgency and a new phrase entered the public conversation: the fiscal gap, referring to the inability of the state to sustain the current high levels of spending in the face of inevitably declining oil production, the engine of state spending.

In the 1990s new groups like Alaska Common Ground, Alaskans for a Plan and the Fiscal Policy Council of Alaska joined the fray to promote the need for a long-term fiscal plan for Alaska. The movement gathered a certain momentum but never seemed to reach critical mass, perhaps due to the rebound of the economy in the 1990s. Starting in 1988 the state added jobs every year through the current year, 2009. It's hard to cry wolf about a fiscal gap when people are enjoying the benefits of a strong labor market.

Interest in the permanent fund was high, however, and study groups abounded. This interest coalesced in the Principles and Interests Project, a statewide conference and series of over 100 public meetings convened by the Alaska Humanities Forum and conducted in 41 communities in 1997 and 1998 to discuss the role of the fund in Alaska's future.

What emerged was termed in the final report the "paradoxes of public wealth," as perceived by the Alaskans who participated. These paradoxes were the tensions between the oil wealth in hand, the uncertainty of the post-oil landscape and a general lack of confidence in the ability of public institutions and leaders to adequately plan for the future. The tension still exists and has yet to be resolved. A Conference of Alaskans in 2004 on the topic failed to produce consensus or meaningful change, despite much publicity and effort by the 55 participants chosen from around the state in an echo of the original Constitutional Convention.

By the end of the 1990s there seemed to be an active core of individuals who were strongly invested in citizen-led civic engagement. These individuals from academia, government and business believed in the ability of, and the need for, Alaskans to establish priorities for their government. These "usual suspects" came together in 1999 for yet another effort, the grandest yet: Alaska 20/20, a multi-year process of public meetings to develop not only a collective vision for the future of Alaska, but also a set of concrete benchmarks by which to measure our progress.

Alaska 20/20 was based on the Oregon Progress Board, at that point considered a successful model for civic engagement in that state. Alaska 20/20 was incubated as a project of the Alaska Humanities Forum with the support of various other stakeholder groups. In the fall of 2001, a statewide Alaska Values Survey of 1,000 households was conducted to identify issues important to Alaskans. Focus group meetings in communities around the state followed the survey.

The results were presented in November 2001 at the Conference on Alaska's Future. More than five hundred Alaskans met in Anchorage for two days. They raised what University of Alaska President Mark Hamilton called "a chorus of strong voices," to develop visions and goals that would become the focus of a statewide conversation. Throughout 2002 over a hundred meetings

were held statewide to gather the thoughts and opinions of Alaskans, and to ensure the voices of Alaska Natives were heard a separate survey of 500 Native households was conducted.

In January 2003 I was hired as the executive director of the project, and later that year I oversaw the transition of Alaska 20/20 into its own nonprofit entity. Five public workgroups in the areas of education, economy, environment, communities and government worked through the year and presented their recommendations for benchmarks in December 2003. A draft progress report for Alaska was released at the February 2004 State of the State Conference. 180 participants from around the state discussed priorities among the various issues and strategies for making progress on them.

The first Alaska Progress Report was published in October 2004; more than 10,000 print copies were distributed and thousands more accessed online. More reports followed, but by 2006 I was wondering what the point of it all was. Every year we produced a report card; every year we got a modest media bump. In the interim I devoted my time and energy to public presentations and raising my own salary. An enormous quantity of time and money had been expended to develop the measures of progress in the annual report. It even had a catchy title: 49 measures for the 49th state.

And yet we didn't seem to be making a difference. No organizations, public or private, seemed willing to adopt the benchmarks. The citizens of our supposed owner state were still on the outside looking in, clamoring to be heard. Part of this is simple organizational culture: why would an organization put itself at the mercy of externally imposed measures of success, no matter how well-thought out and intentioned?

Another dynamic is that organizations, governmental and otherwise, are becoming more sophisticated in managing and reporting their own performance. About the same time Alaska 20/20 was established the State of Alaska was taking baby steps towards its own accountability effort, Missions and Measures. The goal was to attach concrete indicators to all budgeted activities of government. As of 2009, ten years later, implementation is spotty at best.

And so in 2006 I recommended to the Alaska 20/20 board of directors that if we could not find a way to make our objectives and indicators a meaningful part of how government and nonprofit groups in Alaska measured their success in translating public money into public good, we ought to close our doors. After some difficult conversations the board approved, and by the end of the year Alaska 20/20 was no more. I had successfully lobbied myself out of a job, in the process driving a stake through the heart of the most ambitious civic engagement effort in Alaska's history.

The challenge of the future

When thinking about civic engagement I frequently return to the "first principles" of public policy enumerated by Robert Reich in his book, "The Power of Public Ideas." Reich saw three questions that any public policy answers implicitly: how people behave as citizens, why society is better off in one state than another, and the appropriate role of government in defining and solving public problems. These questions do indeed need to be answered anew by each generation, but that doesn't mean that the process itself should change.

The trajectory of civic engagement in Alaska has run from the populism of the 1960s and 70s to the formalized groups of the 1980s and 1990s to the grand experiment of Alaska 20/20 in the past decade. Tremendous energy has been expended since statehood attempting to establish a process for civic engagement that can operate in the wide gaps between elections, which in any case are only the crudest mechanism for translating public preferences into public policies. We can take pride in the energy we have expended, but we should also take caution from such frequent reinvention.

Just as election strategies and tactics evolve while the basic electoral process stays constant, we need a new model for civic engagement that allows us to focus on the content and not the format.

Current models of civic engagement have much to offer, particularly those that focus on community level change where public institutions are most responsive to citizen input. A useful exploration of the dynamics at that level is the book “Results That Matter: Improving Communities by Engaging Citizens, Measuring Performance and Getting Things Done.” The successful communities the authors hold forth as examples have established cyclical, multi-year processes that connect citizen preferences with the work being done by public institutions, and vice versa. If I had to give a simple explanation for why Alaska 20/20 ultimately fell short, it would be that we never successfully closed that loop.

Fifty years after statehood there are already experiments like this underway in Alaska communities. In Anchorage the local United Way has partnered with community organizations and municipal government to “turn the curve” on a carefully selected portfolio of social, economic and environmental trends. Alaskans have never hesitated to absorb what is useful, from the creation of a state constitution that is widely recognized as a model of best practice was only the beginning.

This is the process of “accomplishing democracy” of which John Dewey wrote. Fundamentally it’s about change, the evolution of public policies and institutions, guided by civic engagement and for the benefit of not just us but succeeding generations.

Our reasons to be concerned about “succeeding generations” are as numerous as the names of our children. My three-year-old son Sam is sleeping in the next room. Sam was born in 2005, fifty years after 55 eminent Alaskans put pen to paper in a great act of deliberative democracy. His own heritage reflects the diversity of Alaskans today, with Alaska Native, American Indian and Caucasian ancestry. In fifteen years, ready or not, he will assume his own mantle of civic responsibility.

Parts of that mantle he will need to construct himself. Parts of it, I hope, we will be able to give to him.