

Vox popu-lie: Elected officials in Minneapolis mishear the voice of the people

Elected officials in Minneapolis mishear the voice of the people by concentrating on marginal bleats. It's time to restore true democracy.

By **Doug R. Berdie** | OCTOBER 25, 2019 — 6:15PM

Most people would agree that democracies exist to govern according to the views and desires of those who live within them. Although that sounds like a simple objective, implementing it is less straightforward.

In school we were told that early American colonists gathered occasionally in town centers to discuss issues and make decisions. But as governments encompass expanded geographic areas and populations, direct democracy becomes too unwieldy a process and officials are typically elected to make decisions that affect their constituents. Hence, the term “representative democracy.”

Both governments and other organizations that elect representatives differ in how much input leaders seek from those who elected them, and in the ways in which such input is obtained. Among state, county and city governments, park boards and school boards — among governing bodies in nonprofit organizations, business corporations, unions, condominium associations, etc. — some go out of their way to obtain constituent input, while others seem to believe, even if they don't state, “We know what our people want.”

Such leaders espouse the view that, once elected, it's up to them to make the decisions they believe best meet true needs — with little reference to the conscious wishes of their constituency.

In the mid-1970s, the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul commissioned resident surveys of their neighborhoods (Cedar-Riverside, Marcy-Holmes, etc., in Minneapolis; Payne-Phalen, Dayton's Bluff, etc., in St. Paul). City policymakers used that feedback to plan for those neighborhoods — actually acknowledging that not all neighborhoods had the same needs and desires.

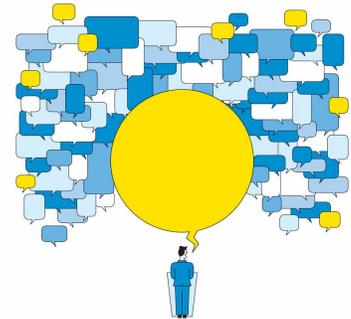
These results were given to each city's planning organization, which in turn presented them to the city councils, park boards, etc., of the two cities as the “voice of residents.”

More recently, though, it seems “citizen input” (when it exists at all) has consisted largely of comments at public hearings (such as ones Minneapolis apparently held about banning new retail drive-throughs, and which it plans to hold regarding changing its charter so budgeting can be done only once every two years rather than annually).

Of course, what happens at public hearings is that the loudest voices often get their way, with no assurance that the most forcefully expressed views are representative of those who live in the area. What's more, such meetings do not collect any input from those who cannot attend for various reasons (conflicting demands on their time, physical disabilities, discomfort voicing one's issues in a public forum, etc.).

In addition, meetings are conducted in varying ways. In some, attendees voice their opinions before a vote is taken. In others, input is allowed only after votes have been taken, which negates any real effect.

What's particularly troubling about the Minneapolis City Council and mayor's office these days is what psychologists would call the cognitive bias of “false consensus” — whereby elected representatives overestimate the extent to which their beliefs are typical of the people they represent.



JOSH JONES — STAR TRIBUNE

Illustration.

This general human tendency is reinforced when people regularly interact mainly with individuals who share their values and beliefs while avoiding people who disagree with them. This overreliance on input from a very few like-minded people helps explain statements that, on their face, are so absurd it's hard to know what to make of them.

An example was the justification offered, [according](http://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-city-council-committee-votes-to-ban-new-drive-through-facilities/513519562/) (<http://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-city-council-committee-votes-to-ban-new-drive-through-facilities/513519562/>) to the Aug. 2 Star Tribune, by City Council Member Lisa Goodman for banning new drive-throughs: "It is nonsensical for people who walk or bike to be thinking about having to go across large driveways," she said.

Now, pedestrians and bicyclists have been crossing such drive-throughs, bravely traversing mall and supermarket parking lots, for many years. Is there any evidence this has represented a problem? Does it make more sense to force physically challenged people who now benefit from drive-throughs to park, extract wheelchairs or walkers, then struggle in and out of retail establishments, winter and summer?

Because of this cognitive bias, it is critical for elected representatives in organizations of all types and at all levels to more actively seek truly meaningful constituent input — not only to learn what people actually want, but also to understand why they feel as they do.

Although getting clear, unbiased constituent input is not easy, it can be done. It has been done in the past. It is being done now in some places. Good governance requires Minneapolis to do better.

There are two steps to honest citizen input. The first is to define and understand the issues of relevance.

So, for example, if the city wants to tinker with or reorganize how traffic flows in Minneapolis, it needs to understand why people drive where, when and how they currently do. Without that understanding, any re-engineering actions are almost certain to have harmful unintended consequences.

For example, it is either naive or petulant for some officials to assume that because they can walk to work everyone else ought to be able to fashion a life in which they can do so.

Direct information from people who live in Minneapolis (and/or who travel through it) would illuminate the actual transportation needs and behavior of people.

Not many years ago, government officials routinely conducted research in which residents were recruited in a representative manner to keep travel diaries so travel planners could analyze actual behavior and understand both (1) why people did what they did and (2) whether and how their needs could be met with alternative travel options. The focus was not to *change* people's needs but to determine how best to *meet* them.

The needs of a parent who lives in Edina and drops off a child on the way to work in downtown Minneapolis, then collects the child after work — stopping for groceries or a prescription along the way — are not the same as the needs of a single person who lives a block from a bus line that connects with the office.

If this type of research is still being done, why isn't the public told about it, and how the results of it are being used to guide governmental policy?

If this type of research is not being done, why is that?

A review of how Minneapolis obtained citizen input related to its 2040 Plan for city growth and development reveals that the primary input method was a "Meeting-in-a-Box" procedure. Interested citizens were asked to create input groups (which used to be called "focus groups" and have more recently been called "listening sessions"). Citizens whom the organizer knew and invited could attend and talk in grandiose terms about what they see their needs being (via the use of unstructured, open-ended questions). The only quantifiable data sought related to demographics, etc.

This method is not a bad one for “identifying issues” and obtaining ideas for how to address them. But a limitation is that no guarantee exists that all relevant issues are defined.

For example, despite the accelerated crime rate in the city, I see no mention in the 2040 materials of the gangs perpetrating much of the violence. How that can be absent in such a monumental document is baffling.

The “Meeting-in-a-Box” method also does nothing to measure how widespread concerns are that were brought up in these meetings, which could help prioritize which issues are most important across the entire citizen base. We have no evidence that the 2040 Plan, despite being designed to make major changes in Minneapolis that will affect all citizens over the next 20 years, included that type of quantifiably reliable feedback from citizens.

So, for example, the 2040 Plan does not reference the percentage of residents who want drive-throughs banned vs. those who do not. The same goes for making it more difficult to drive through the city. No data is apparent measuring how disruptive to Minneapolitans will be the various “solutions” the city plans to implement.

A scientifically representative survey with rating questions would give city leadership insights into which proposed solutions are most palatable to citizens. Instead, the process that has been used exploits the citizenry by using the “Meeting-in-a-Box” technique to obtain some great ideas city leaders can then cherry-pick to suit their own agenda.

It’s as if to say, “Give us your ideas, and we’ll decide which to pursue; we know what’s best for you” — hardly how democracy was envisioned by our founders.

I’ve spent more than 45 years working with America’s largest corporations helping them obtain statistically objective feedback so they can understand how best to serve their various constituencies. Is it too much to ask that Minneapolis city government energetically seek reliable data from its citizens when making plans that will affect us all?

Doug R. Berdie, of Minneapolis, is a semiretired marketing executive and researcher.
