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Screening Community Proposals

Four Questions to Determine Value

"This is important! You should be doing this!" There are few public meetings I attended where someone didn't come up to me to tell me what my job should be. Sometimes they were suggestions; sometimes they were demands. Sometimes the suggestions were thoughtful; sometimes the demands were part of a personal agenda.

Not all the encounters were well-intentioned. I once had a politically-connected community leader threaten at a public meeting to "have my head on a platter." I pointed out that I served at the pleasure of my mayor and that he (the mayor) had the right to fire me but until he did, the answer to his ridiculous demand was still. "No."

Input from the public may not always be welcome, but it comes with the job and you do have a responsibility to at least give it some consideration.

Screen Proposals with Honest Responses

My initial response to some suggestions is something along the lines of, "I agree that what you are suggesting is important. However, I

am paid by the Mayor to set priorities and this is not one." A trifle harsh, but the simple fact is there is never sufficient money or political will to do all the things we should be doing to be fully prepared. Sometimes you are better off being honest with people up front than to let them think their proposal has a chance of going anywhere.

A community group once asked that I do something that, while reasonable, was beyond my ability to do and I told them so and why. They were stunned. This was a constituency very connected to my Mayor and no one ever told them, "No." They proposed an alternative that still exceeded what I could do, and I explained this. The third alternative I could do, and I promised to do it and did. This was an uncomfortable situation initially but by being honest, I generated considerable trust within the community.

Four Key Questions

However, there were times, where I had little option but to consider the proposals of community groups. There were also those rare cases where the proposal had merit. In these cases, I used a four-question screening process.

1. Why is this a problem?

My first step was to get the proposer to tell me why they think the issue we are dealing with is a problem. What I'm really looking for here is evidence of a hidden agenda and to see if the proposer truly understands the nature of the issue.

2. Why is this *my* problem?

There's an old saying, "Not my circus, not my monkey." Many times, proposers are seeking to land a problem on your back. This may be because no one else wants to deal with it or it may be a problem they want to move from their back to yours. This gets back to that hidden agenda. If the proposer can't convince me that I own the problem, it's not my problem.

3. What solution do you propose?

Most people are good at pointing out problems; they're not so good at offering solutions. If someone comes to me and says, "Here's a problem; deal with it," it's going to have to be a truly important problem well within my responsibilities to make me add it to my overlong list of priorities. If, on the other hand, they've put some thought into the issues and have a proposal for action, we move the discussion from considering the problem to evaluating a potential solution.

4. What support will you provide?

This is a deal breaker for me. If you're not prepared to put some skin in the game, you're just looking to have that

monkey jump from your back to mine. If this problem is truly important, the proposer should be willing to support the solution. For example, they could offer to raise community support, chair a committee, assist in researching the issue, or lobby elected officials.

Calling in the Experts

The four questions are useful for many situations but there are invariably those times where the individual or group have sufficient political clout that you must spend time on their proposal. In this case, I make use of a panel of subject matter experts.

I had one politically connected person who was enamored by the Dunkirk-like small boat evacuations that took place during the 1906 earthquake. He felt we should have a plan to evacuate the waterfront hotels in the same manner. It took a series of meetings with representatives from several City agencies to convince him that evacuating people across unsafe ground subject to sand boils onto a dock whose load bearing capacity was unknown and that had only one route in or out was not the best of ideas, even if we could craft a plan that involved hundred of independently owned vessels. However, the meetings did help clarify our existing evacuation plans.

Listen Carefully

It's never a good idea to dismiss public concerns out of hand. A lot of good ideas have come out of suggestions at community meetings. But you need a system for separating the wheat from the chaff. We cannot afford to spend too much time chasing ideas that have little support or do not make sense. The four questions I've noted here enable you to begin a dialogue that could lead to a productive exchange of ideas. 