

Extension's Involvement in Politics: A Case Study¹

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An oft asked question by Extension professionals is: Should we become involved in politics to implement certain programs? Jeffrey, in a case study, explains how he and others in Rhode Island became involved in their state's political system to implement a resource-use program. By involvement in the political arena, a small group of individuals who shared the same values were able to make major changes in the governmental structure of their state. Jeffrey explains in the article how the social-action model can function in politics.

More and more attention is being given to land and resource use as Americans realize that these commodities aren't inexhaustible. The competition for resource use is heightened when vested interests are directly or indirectly affected. Resource use is most frequently determined within the framework of a political system.

This article presents a case study in the politics of resource use. It analyzes the achievement of action programs for resource use through a state political system.² The following incidents occurred within the political structure of Rhode Island and illustrate how an organized group of individuals who share the same values—and have

the same vested interest—can determine political action.

The Beginning

Four men from Rhode Island, who felt that greater public attention should be directed toward the use of Rhode Island's natural resources, got together. One was a retired industrialist, another a state employee, the third an active conservationist, and the fourth a professor of forestry.

The first meeting led to several more, from which these four men drafted a tentative statement of purpose. They had conceptualized the beginning of an action program, briefly stated as follows:

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1. The state's natural resources—soil, water, forests, fisheries, wildlife, and scenic beauty—can contribute substantially to the economy of the state and to the well-being of its citizens.
2. Rhode Island has limited natural resources and, therefore, must of necessity receive the maximum value and use from each one of these resources.
3. To do this requires that the state's resources should be integrated skillfully in a state-wide, multiple-use policy and program to take advantage of the full potential of each of the resources.
4. To achieve any adequate multiple-use program, public understanding, support, and initiative are required.

In view of these factors, the men recommended that an informal advisory board to the administrative branch of the state government be formed.

The following year, four more people joined the group. Two were from the state university—one a political scientist, the other (this author) a resource economist. The other two were local community planners. For the next six months, these eight men met and decided that any program suggested by this group must take cognizance of the vested interests of the state agencies concerned with resource use and development.

To better understand the commitments of each of the state agencies concerned with resource use

and development, participants of the group, which was unofficially referred to as the Natural Resources Study Group, interviewed the heads of the various divisions in the state government. Not only were heads of the state agencies interviewed, but other persons known to be interested in resource use were invited to attend the sessions.

Significant to the success of the study group was the cooperation of the state officials. The head of each division gave freely of his time in outlining his programs and answering questions on how these programs might be improved. Following each interview, the study group held its own meetings to discuss what had been learned. At both the interviews and the follow-up sessions a reporter from the major state paper attended as a nonofficial observer. The value of his reporting on the group's activities at a later date cannot be overestimated. The sessions with government division chiefs lasted about six months and culminated in a report titled, "Natural Resources in Rhode Island." This report designated the study group as the Natural Resources Group of Rhode Island.

The major recommendations of this report were:

1. Reorganization of the structure of government toward the establishment of a Department of Natural Resources.
2. Organization along five functional lines that would incorporate the existing departments and divisions of agri-

culture, forestry, wildlife, water resource development, park and recreation, navigation and boat controls, shore and harbor development, bay and river pollution abatement, and plant, insect, and disease control.

3. Appointment of a lay advisory commission to serve as advisors to the proposed Department of Natural Resources.

Politics Takes Over

The group was then concerned with implementing the proposed program. What was originally a study group became a political action group. When the publication date of the report was determined, organizational plans, which included every member of the group, were spelled out. The tentative agenda read like a political election campaign. Some of the assignments were:

1. Preparing the final draft of the report.
2. Transmitting the letter and the cover design.
3. Preparing special covers for the top hierarchy in the state government.
4. Overseeing the printing and editing of the report (1000 copies).
5. Writing and arranging coverage by radio and newspaper.
6. Setting the timetable for distribution of the report.
7. Arranging for meetings with legislators and others who

might promote the adoption of the report.

A final assignment was drawn up, outlining which key people throughout the state would be contacted and by which members of the group. Needless to say, the contacts were bipartisan. Appointments were made first with the governor and then the majority and minority leaders of the House and Senate. State-wide mailing to all legislators, directors, division chiefs, agricultural groups, League of Women Voters, conservation commissions, sportsmen's groups, granges, and garden clubs was arranged. This kind of effort made an impact on the state's leaders and informed the public. The activities of this group caused an awareness in resource use among state legislators.

This organized campaign to educate the people of the state about resource uses within the state led to the second event.

Creating A Task Force

About a week after the Natural Resources Group's report was made public, the governor of Rhode Island signed Executive Order No. 6, creating a Natural Resources Task Force. It consisted of eight members: three were from the Natural Resources Group, two from the legislature—the chairman of the Judiciary Committee of the House and the House deputy minority leader—two were influential attorneys interested in natural resources, and one was the director of the Department

of Agriculture and Conservation. The appointments were as bipartisan as possible. It was most apparent that the group had been formed for political action and that legislation was wanted.

The first meeting of the Natural Resources Task Force was called immediately after the executive order was issued. The task force reviewed all information available and called in experts from all government divisions as they were needed. Previous bills on natural resource use that had failed to pass the General Assembly were reviewed.

Once this groundwork was completed, a public hearing was held. The attendance was good. As might be anticipated, those at the hearing, for the most part, were proponents of natural resource legislation. The Natural Resources Group was very much in support of a change in the state's organization.

Report to Governor

Following the hearing, a report was submitted to the governor. Specifically, it recommended seven bills: (1) the Green Acres Act, (2) the Green Acres Bond Issue, (3) a bill to establish a Department of Natural Resources, (4) a bill to enhance the power of conservation commissions, (5) an act to conserve open spaces, (6) an act to encourage the preservation of natural areas, and (7) an act concerning taxation of farm and forest land.

Although there were seven specific bills, only four called for specific legislative enactment: the

Green Acres Act, the Green Acres Bond Issue, the establishment of a Department of Natural Resources, and the bill to institute tax easements on farm and forest land. The other bills essentially changed existing laws or amplified the activities of the Department of Natural Resources.

These four bills were submitted to the General Assembly immediately, but only two came out of committee in that session. Two bills—the Green Acres Act and the Green Acres Bond Issue—constituted the Green Acres Act and were implemented when the bond issue funding them was approved by the electorate in November.³

The following year the remaining bills—the establishment of the Department of Natural Resources and the farm and forest taxation bill—were again before the legislators. This time the bill to establish the Department of Natural Resources passed and the director of the Department of Agriculture and Conservation was then appointed director of the new department.

It's important to note that during this entire period, the Natural Resources Group was active in promoting the bills' passage. The group continued to hold informal meetings of legislators to discuss controversial parts of the bill . . . such activity kept the issue alive.

The farm and forest taxation bill was reintroduced at the last session of the legislature and finally, though by a narrow margin, became law.

The Use of Politics

What then do these incidents mean in respect to the use of politics in determining resource use? In the first place, it demonstrates how a small group of people, willing to become engaged in the political arena, can instigate a major change in the governmental structure.

Secondly, to influence policy you must go where the action is—you must use the implementative machinery that only a political system such as ours provides. It isn't enough to merely distribute bulletins or write news releases. It isn't enough to mail reports to the legislators. It isn't enough to reach the taxpayers through mass media. Nor is careful wooing of the state government's top hierarchy enough. You must become deeply involved with an action group designed to affect political policy if you want to bring about a change.

Thirdly, it's true that your values determine the kind of an action group you associate with. Decisions by professionals tend to be made in terms of the ideal. However, when associated with a politically appointed group, it's apparent that a professional must be willing to compromise for this is the nature of the politically appointed group.

The difference between achieving the ideal and achieving a compromised goal can be illustrated by one recommendation of the task force report. In this report specific recommendations for open space were made, without consideration of the

relative merits of alternatives.

In the eyes of the resource economist on the task force, one of the areas finally recommended for development over another was vastly inferior from the viewpoint of maximum benefit to another available area. However, the site recommended by the task force had greater political feasibility. Thus, the professional standards of the resource economist were challenged; they were compromised by political judgments.

Those not willing to compromise shouldn't become part of a political action group, for often political action can only result from compromise. A group such as the task force has to come up with some tangible recommendations that have a reasonable chance of being adopted. Such is the nature of the political arena.

Observations

What conceptual observations might be made about the various processes involved in our case study?

First, what took place is a fairly classic example of the social action model at work. Note that in the beginning we had our small group of "initiators," the people who got an idea. They spent some time struggling to define what it was they really wish to accomplish, during the course of which they widened their study committee. Here we see that they chose persons with similar professional backgrounds whose

views and expertise reinforces their own position.

The study group next went through the traditional fact-finding and analytical stage where resource and administrative personnel were brought in and consulted. Following this, specific proposals were drafted and a plan of action formulated.

The group then faced the critical phase of any program—action. Again we note that what occurred is in line with what theory tells us should take place . . . the general power structure was assessed and all bases touched. The governor and key party leaders were the first contacted so that they'd be included in the initial stages of the action step. Therefore, they were informed about the plans being made.

Next, full disclosure was made to the general political leadership and key state bureaucracy. In the latter group those likely to be affected had already been contacted and their ideas and support sought. Thus, concerted effort was made so that no unpredicted hostility from these sources would catch the committee unawares. In addition, special interest groups apt to give strong support, were also fully informed.

Finally, the entire issue was laid before the public through the press. The early involvement of a professional journalist makes for an excellent trade-off—the committee gets first-class and sympathetic reporting, and the journalist an inside track to a major set of special interest, feature stories.

In phase two, general issues had been set forth, there was strong public support, the political leadership had been informed and sensitive to the public interests involved, and a blue-ribbon commission had been appointed to bring recommendations to the chief executive.

From this point on, the rate of progress, or "success" as measured by adoption into law, slowed down. Of seven possible pieces of legislation, only two emerged the first year. The following year only one bill (albeit a key one) was forthcoming.

A number of possibilities come to mind. The first, of course, is that the blue-ribbon commission and the proposed legislation came from the governor's office and not the legislature. Would the recommendations have been followed more closely and the action more rapid if the commission had been a creature of the House or Senate? We can't be sure, but political science theory and practice tell us that legislative success frequently depends on "who sponsors what."

A second unknown is where key bureaucratic chiefs really stood when the chips were down as to the absorption of their special domain into a larger but subordinate structure. Did they live up to their publicly endorsed positions or did they engage in "back-door" political contacts to save their own bureaucratic preserves? This again is a fact that can't be ascertained with certainty, but informal feedback indi-

cates active opposition didn't take place. This was largely because the public clientele of the agencies—hunters, conservationists, farmers—supported reorganization. The bureaucrats preferred the possibility of losing some authority to losing their public support.

A final comment seems called for in regard to the role of the research or Extension staff member. Traditionally we've claimed that we haven't performed an advocacy role—that our primary concern has been with the facts. Yet, has this really been the case? Have we not been advocates for D.H.I.A., Green Pastures, grass land farming, electronic farm accounts, county fairs, and artificial breeding, to name a few? Yes, we have and for a good reason: Our research indicated that these were profitable undertakings for our client—the individual farm family.

Therefore, what our case study here suggests is that we have a new client—the public. The issues are shifting from individual welfare to general welfare. General welfare (or group income if you like) comes from the public sector. For the group, as in the case of the individ-

ual, our research is telling us that some answers are better than others. If we're willing to support our findings, then we must become advocates in public issues. When we do this, we automatically become involved in "politics" because decision making in the public sector is conducted through the political process. But our involvement as public educators and researchers means we support policies and positions, not partisan political parties; these we recognize and work with, not for.

Footnotes

1. This article is a revision of a paper presented at the Third Northeast Extension Seminar of the Northeast Public Policy Committee, Media, Pennsylvania, 1967.
2. This discussion is from the author's vantage point of a participant-observer. Any conclusions therefore are mine and will reflect my biases. Needless to say, I'm sure some of the other participants in these political events would have observed things differently.
3. Rhode Island law requires bond issues to be approved by referendum.