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**THE BATTLE OF THE BEACHES: THE JEKYLL ISLAND
REDEVELOPMENT DEBATE**

The Jekyll Island Redevelopment Project epitomizes the challenge and utility of citizen engagement in the management of public resources. As a state-owned “park” managed by the Jekyll Island Authority (JIA), legislation mandates that 65% of the island remain undeveloped; the remaining 35% may be developed to provide residential and recreational amenities. By 2000, the deteriorating condition of many amenities resulted in decreasing visitation which threatened the JIA’s ability to operate on a self-sustaining basis. The JIA accepted a proposal from a private sector partner outlining development that was perceived contrary to the Authority’s preservation mandate. In response, citizens created a grassroots movement to stop development. This paper examines how that process garnered input which resulted in a dramatic revision of a government body’s proposal for the redevelopment of a common resource.

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Introduction

In light of times that warn of environmental degradation, economic downturns, and social turmoil, it is increasingly important to combine resources of government and community to preserve quality of life (Glaser, Yeager, & Parker, 2006). Today's government is under extreme pressure from the public to be more productive and efficient. The public is often impatient and dissatisfied with government's performance and is demanding the revitalization of responsible government practices (Osborne, 1993). These issues can become heightened in the context of government's, and hence the people's, oversight role in the management of common resources that serve a variety of stakeholder needs and interests. Thus, while governmental bodies "realize" the need for the revitalization of government practices to meet modern challenges and restore trust, the incorporation of citizen engagement in policy decisions related to common resources often raise issues and debates that exacerbate government efforts to deliver effective and efficient policy and management decisions. The recent Jekyll Island Redevelopment Project epitomizes both the challenge and utility of local and state-wide citizen engagement in the decision-making process related to the future of a culturally and economically valuable common resource. This paper examines how a citizen engagement process garnered state-wide citizen and political input that resulted in a dramatic revision of a government body's proposal for the redevelopment of a common resource.

Citizen Engagement

The role of citizens in public policy decision-making has significantly increased over the last twenty years and remains an important social policy issue (Santos & Chess, 2003). Modern public administration involves an inherent tension between better responsiveness to citizens as clients and effective collaboration with them as partners. However, it is generally

believed that when partnerships with the citizens are created, the public becomes more involved in defining and solving problems (Mitchell, 2005; Vigoda, 2002). Citizens want to participate in government decision-making because they are afraid of losing “personal contact” and control to large bureaucracies (Creighton, 1981). The National Research Council (1996) concluded that citizen involvement

“is critical to ensure that all relevant information is included, that it is synthesized in a way that addresses parties’ concerns, and that those who may be affected by a decision are sufficiently well informed and involved to participate meaningfully in the decision.” (Stern & Fineberg, 1996, p. 30)

Citizen involvement also reduces cynicism toward government, builds stakeholder consensus, and enhances administrative decision-making (Creighton, 1981; Wang, 2001). Partnerships can be an instrumental mechanism for bringing citizens together and strengthening society (Giquere, 2001).

Collaboration is the cornerstone of the democratic process, which operates on the principles of citizen participation and ownership of decisions (Gray, 1989). Values associated with democracy include equality, participation, and individuality, which are harmonious with the ideals of collaboration (Thompson, 1983). Increased citizen involvement reflects a resurgence of interest in these fundamental democratic principles.

Many philanthropic groups and non-profit organizations are extensions of the collective interest and concerns of citizens. Through these groups, civil society, business, and government work together to design strategies, adapt policies to local conditions, and take initiatives consistent with shared priorities. Through citizen participation, representative democracies build civic capacity and increase the likelihood of fairer and more broadly supported decisions (English, Peretz, & Manderschied, 2004). Citizens heightened awareness of broader social issues is creating opportunities to find solutions to financial, human, and capital resource problems through avenues of partnership and collaboration.

Managing the Commons

Over the past few decades, the management of common resources has been in a state of turmoil in the United States and abroad. Battles over natural resource use, fights over forest and range management, and suburban planning and rural development strategies, to name a few, have created conflict in communities, agencies, and courtrooms. Enormous amounts of time, energy, and money are spent on these issues with no clear sense of resolution. The debates that follow these issues are undermining the civility that allows individuals to live and work with one another (Wondolleck & Yaffee, 2000). However, through the cooperative process of collaboration, conflicts over the management of common resources can be addressed in ways that sustain and restore the quality of the natural environment, restore neighbors trust with one another, and enhance the quality of people's lives (Wondolleck & Yaffee, 2000).

Natural resource policy scholars, practitioners, and managers who are responsible for managing wicked resource problems are becoming increasingly aware that new, more sophisticated approaches are needed to replace current practices (Pearson, 2001; Rittel & Webber, 1973; Weber, Lovrich, & Gaffney, 2005). Collaboration of businesses, agencies, and involved citizens allow the decision-making process to address scientific facts while taking into account societal concerns. All partners, in sharing their ideas, knowledge, and resources, can potentially gain from the contributions of others (McLaughlin, 2004). Innovative partnerships and conflict-management approaches have created a more democratic and civil approach to addressing natural resource problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Partnerships offer a process for increasing the involvement of citizens and providing a viable approach for managing common resources and building an understanding of the connection(s) between humans and nature. Advocates of public participatory partnerships

believe that citizens will become empowered by belonging to partnership processes and by working collaboratively for collective solutions (Mitchell, 2005).

The Evolution of Jekyll Island as a Public Resource

Jekyll Island was originally developed as a privately held agricultural plantation. Christopher Poulain du Bigon, a French immigrant, acquired full ownership circa 1800 and successfully raised Sea Island cotton until the American Civil War. The abolition of slave labor rendered plantation-based operations impractical and the du Bignon family sold sections of the island to various individuals during the reconstruction era (McCash & McCash, 1986).

From 1886 to 1930, the island flourished as a privately held retreat known as the “Jekyll Island Club.” Club members represented the elite families of that day including the Macys, Astors, Goodyears, Rockefellers, and Vanderbilts (Bagwell, 1998). Throughout the 1930’s, the Great Depression affected the ability of many members to continue club membership; this resulted in a decline in membership and club revenue. An additional challenge emerged in 1941 as the advent of US involvement in World War II necessitated a diversion of domestic labor, supplies and resources to sustain the war effort. As a result of these managerial challenges, club officials suspended operations following the 1942 season with plans for resuming operations after the war.

By 1945, Club officers realized that continued operations were not sustainable via the private membership business model. A syndicate formed in collaboration with officers of the Sea Island Company that owned and operated The Cloister resort on neighboring St. Simons Island. The syndicate’s plan was to acquire Jekyll Island, build a causeway from the island to the mainland, and reposition operations in the style of The Cloister, that is, as a “high end”

non-membership based resort. The sudden death of a key syndicate member caused this plan to fail (McCash & McCash, 1986).

During 1946, Georgia Governor Ellis G. Arnall established a committee charged with determining the viability of establishing one of Georgia's barrier islands as a state park. The committee identified Jekyll Island and approached the Jekyll Island Club who responded that the island was not for sale. Undeterred, the state condemned the island and confiscated it for public use. This action occurred with the consent of the Jekyll Island Club upon a settlement of \$675,000. Hence, Jekyll Island became a state owned public resource on October 8, 1947 (Handel, 2007; McCash & McCash, 1986).

Following the 1947 state purchase, the island was designated as "Jekyll Island State Park" with the mandate to be "available to people of average income" with facilities and recreation opportunities to be provided at "the lowest rates reasonable and possible for the benefit of the people of Georgia" (Jekyll Island State Park Authority Act, 1950). As a state park, the island initially fell under the purview of the Georgia Department of Parks. In 1950, the legislature chartered the Jekyll Island State Park Authority (JIA) to manage the island's development, maintenance and operations on behalf of the state (Jekyll Island State Park Authority Act, 1950).

In effort to maintain the island's unique and largely undisturbed natural environment and island ecology, the state decreed that 65% of the land must remain undeveloped while the remaining 35% available for development to provide both residential and recreational amenities.

During the 1950 to 2000 period, the island grew to hold more than 600 private homes, eight hotels, a campground, a convention center, a National Historic Landmark District, and numerous recreation amenities. However, by the late 1990s, as the island's lodging stock deteriorated and, given the expiration of leases in 2049, private sector operators were not

inclined to upgrade or replace those facilities. Based on estimates of historic visitation rates, consultants retained by the JIA determined that visitation peaked at an estimated 2.1 million visitors in 1989-1990 and totaled approximately 1.49 million visitors in fiscal year 2008 (Bleakly Advisory Group, 2009; Jekyll Island State Park Authority, 2008). This situation presented a serious challenge to the JIA's efforts to operate a self-sustaining state-owned common resource.

Currently, the Jekyll Island Authority (JIA) consists of a nine member board appointed by the state governor and charged with managerial oversight of the Island (Secretary of State Georgia Archives, 2007). The Authority's current mission is to "provide trustworthy stewardship and conservation of our natural and cultural resources, and generate appropriate revenues to sustain, enhance and develop services, programs and amenities that maximize benefits to our customers, guests and employees." The vision of the JIA is that "the standard of Jekyll Island will be continuing improvement and excellence through progressive stewardship, product and service delivery, employee career development and financial responsibility. Jekyll Island will be recognized as the choice destination among all who discover and enjoy its unique environment, services and amenities." (Annual Report, 2004).

Engaging the Citizenry

From that mission and vision, the JIA has been responsible for the island's master planning process including the identification of strategies for the management, preservation and development of the island. In 2004, the 1996 Master Plan was updated reaffirming the JIA's key missions as adherence to the 35% development constraint and to "provide a Jekyll Island affordable and available to all Georgians" (Lesser, 2004, p. 1). The plan further identified a series of key issues projected to impact the JIA's ability to fulfill those missions

while at the same time operate as a self-sustaining entity. These key issues included declining visitation, poor lodging opportunities, the lack of a convention hotel adjacent to the conference center, the need for a conservation plan, and a development/revitalization plan targeting residential and lodging opportunities capable of generating significant long-term revenue streams. The plan's recommendation was that the JIA identify and pursue revenue enhancement options consistent with the 65%/35% rule. Such options were suggested to focus on a "program of primarily redeveloping sites already considered developed while implementing a plan to assure conservation of the island's natural resources" (Lesser, 2004, p. 1).

By September 2006, the JIA began exploring strategies to address those issues; these included a significant redevelopment of the tourism infrastructure, as well as a restructuring of the long-term residential leases. A core group of Jekyll Island residents became aware of this work and created a grassroots organization named the Initiative to Protect Jekyll Island (IPJI) with a mission to serve as the voice of Jekyll Island's visitors (Egan, 2008). As island residents, the organizers of this citizen's group clearly had a stake in island redevelopment and lease restructuring. However, through a process that involved focusing public attention on the threats to the 65%/35% development cap, affordability to the common man, and destruction of the traditional Jekyll Island experience, the IPJI became positioned as the leading proponent of the people's voice regarding the infrastructure redevelopment issues and, hence mobilized citizens to become engaged. As stated by the IPJI, "by all indications, the Board of Directors of the Jekyll Island Authority intends to upscale Jekyll's lodgings and various amenities, pricing them beyond the reach of many of its traditional visitors" (Egan, 2008). Methods and tools used by the IPJI included the development of a website (including email alerts, a quarterly newsletter, etc.), launching web-based petitions, "recruiting" preservation minded politicians, systematically issuing press

releases to local and national media, and administering a series of surveys to past visitors and residents of Georgia. In addition, the IPJI created a web based resource center from which citizens could obtain news releases and advertisement copy for distribution as well as a power point presentation designed for use at schools and public meetings. These outreach methods created awareness of the redevelopment issues across the Southeast and nationally among past visitors that resulted in extreme pressure on politicians and the JIA.

In March 2007, the JIA retained a consultant to identify the potential for private sector participation in the revitalization of island amenities and to draft a request for proposals (RFP) to solicit specific revitalization plans consistent with the recommendations of the 2004 Master Plan Update. In April 2007, a single public session was held to secure input on the draft RFP. This session was held on Jekyll Island and attended primarily by Jekyll Island residents. In June a finalized RFP was issued. As stated in the RFP:

It is JIA's intent to protect the island's natural and cultural resources as its primary responsibility and guiding principle for all development activities. The initial focus of the partnership and this RFP will be the successful redevelopment of the current convention center site and adjacent ocean-front property owned by the Authority, totaling approximately 45 acres, into a mixed use town center, which will serve as the commercial heart of the island and a gathering place for Jekyll Island visitors and residents for decades to come. As part of this redevelopment the existing convention center facilities can be incorporated, modified or moved to another suitable location acceptable to the Authority. For identification purposes, the redevelopment opportunity is described throughout this RFP as the "town center site." (Handel, 2007; JIA, 2007)

Citizen concern reached a pinnacle in September of 2007 when the JIA announced the selection of Linger Longer Communities Corporation (LLC) as its private sector partner. The proposed redevelopment plan included a town center spanning 63 acres, 277 condominiums, 160 time-share units, a retail center, three hotels, a new convention center, and a public park. Based on the perception that the concerns of Jekyll Island residents and Georgia citizen-tourists were being disregarded and that the JIA had selected a politically connected private partner, media coverage heightened which enabled the IPJI to engender a wider level a

statewide citizen engagement. Georgia politicians, state park officials, and the JIA received strong citizen objection to the plan.

In an attempt to quantify citizen concerns and halt development plans, the IPJI launched an online petition that secured approximately 10,000 signatures (Egan, 2008). Following the petition and concurrent with intense media scrutiny, a state senator sponsored resolution was presented to Georgia Governor Perdue and the Jekyll Island House-Senate Oversight Committee calling for the JIA Board of Directors to honor both the affordability and the environmental preservation mandates featured in the Jekyll Island State Park's founding legislation. In early 2008, legislation was introduced with the goal to preserve Jekyll Island's open vista beaches by keeping them unobstructed and directly accessible to the general public. If passed, such legislation would have prevented implementation of the LLC town center plan that had been selected by the JIA. Political and public debate intensified during the discussion of this bill and the larger question of Jekyll Island's future. The Senate's Economic Development Committee prevented the bill from reaching a full vote on the floor. Further action reflecting the intensity of the debate during early 2008 included the replacement of the JIA executive director, legal action threatened based on Georgia's Shore Protection Act, and the Governor's dismissal of a "people's voice" state senator from the JIA Board of Directors (Egan, 2008).

In October 2008, LLC introduced a radically reduced redevelopment plan incorporating public input (Jekyll Island Authority, 2008). This plan includes four "revitalization areas" – Beach Village, Convention Center, Beachfront Park, and Island Entry Corridor – that embrace 39 acres as opposed to the originally planned 63 acres. Additionally, the number of new hotels was reduced from three to two (725 rooms to 350 rooms), the convention center reduced from 141,000 square feet to 76,000, and the retail shopping area limited to 30,000 square feet (from 59,000). The formerly planned "condominiums" (277

units) and “time-share units” (160 units) were recast as 160 “vacation ownership/cottage” units (JIA & Linger Longer Jekyll, 2008). Participants of the public participatory process that included island residents and the wider citizenry of Georgia generally viewed the new plan as acceptable. The IPJI reported on its website:

Your active support of Jekyll’s protection empowered the IPJI to speak on behalf of thousands of Jekyll’s visitors, giving us credibility as an organization, media visibility, political weight, and a measure of influence with LLC and the JIA. Thanks are due to each and every one of you for taking the time, for making the effort, to preserve Jekyll’s traditional character and protect its critters and environment. You’ve shown that grassroots civic action can really make a difference (Egan, 2008).

Partnering for Better or Worse

The development of coastal areas in the Southeast USA is a controversial public policy issue, as it often results in a loss of public access to coastal resources. Such controversy, which stemmed in large part from citizen engagement, is well illustrated in the proposed redevelopment of southeastern Georgia’s Jekyll Island State Park.

The JIA and its private sector partner Linger Longer Communities Corporation expended a great deal of political and public capital throughout the process of moving forward with their vision of a revitalized Jekyll Island. However, they seemingly overlooked the importance of public participation in the planning process and the power of citizen engagement.

The complexities and obstacles in the public participation process are well understood in public administration. The ability to take an active role in their government is a right many citizens take for granted. Although there are fewer roadblocks in the public planning stages if citizen engagement is minimal, the result may not be truly representative of citizens’ desires or interests. It is generally held that through working with citizens, public agencies can draw from a broad range of resources and expertise to improve citizens’ overall quality of life (Provan, Veazie, Staten, & Teufel-Shone, 2005). In the case of the Jekyll Island

redevelopment plan, a skilled and motivated grassroots organization reached citizens near and far who had developed a connection to Jekyll Island. Once informed of the plan's "hot button" elements (commercialized development versus preservation, affordability, and perceived "change" of the traditional experience), citizens voiced concerns and took an active role in providing input to the planning process. As a result of the statewide and national attention brought to the stewardship of this common resource by the IPJI, a revised plan was developed and cautiously accepted by the citizenry. Ironically, through positioning of their role and the issues, use of web based resources, diligent attention to developments, and active communication with politicians and the media, this grassroots entity was able to engage citizens beyond the level attempted or attained by the "professional" entities mandated to secure citizen input, that is, the JIA and its selected private sector partner.

The bitter debate that spanned two years appeared to have served as a "lesson learned" for both citizens and the Jekyll Island Authority. The citizenry recognized need to be involved and ever vigilant as evidenced in the past and continuing work of IPJI group, news service coverage, and citizen participation at public meetings. The JIA and its private sector development partner seemingly adopted a more responsive and transparent approach in creating a scaled down revitalization plan that included several major components aimed at ensuring the financial sustainability of the island as a tourism destination as well as a residential community (Jekyll Island Authority, 2008). In December 2008, at least one state elected official, who was also a board member of the Jekyll Island Foundation, heralded that plan as a "win-win" for Jekyll Island and Georgia citizens (Wilkinson, 2008).

However, the February 2009 release of studies commissioned by the JIA intended to serve as a business plan and sound baseline for island development density renewed the controversy and reengaged the public. In reaction to the studies' findings, and the fact that these impact studies were released after contracts had been signed with the private

development partner, state Senator Jeff Chapman requested that Dr. H. Ken Cordell, a public land planning authority and scholar, provide a review of the studies. Cordell reported that:

The conclusion from this review of the ... impact analysis is that it is not based on widely known, published and accepted park planning principles and theory, and the data and analysis are fatally flawed leading to wrong conclusions. It is this reviewer's recommendation that the analysis be rejected and withdrawn from further consideration (Cordell, 2009).

Cordell further noted that implementation of the development levels and financial plans in the current contract would irretrievably change the character of Jekyll Island and the recreational experience(s) that visitors have traditionally sought. So, the distrust and debate concerning the future of this common resource continues as documented in partisan websites and regional media outlets (Initiative to Protect Jekyll Island, 2009; Jekyll Island State Park Authority, 2009; Macon Daily Telegraph, 2009). In summary, this grassroots example of citizen participation provides a stunning, unfolding real time example to public agencies or authorities, private sector development partners, and citizenry of the power and utility of citizen engagement in the common resource planning and management process.

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