

# Building a constituency base for open-space protection in the metro-rural interface: A case study

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**O**pen space protection in the metro-rural interface is increasingly on the agendas of local government officials and citizens. Public involvement activities can provide opportunities for information exchanges between government officials, citizen groups, and private landowners and developers, yet are often neglected.

## **Open space**

Building public support for longterm environmental quality goals such as open space in a metropolitan region is difficult when so many other economic and social goals remain unrealized. Water quality, wildlife habitat, agricultural land, and recreation opportunities are all tied to the preservation of open space, yet most of the public remains unaware of these connections. Quality of life factors which make some urban areas more attractive than others, such as available land, good utilities, and a good work force, can deteriorate if regional growth in industry and housing occurs in an unplanned manner.

Open space planning is the idea that a certain proportion of land in a region should be left undeveloped. In comprehensive regional landscape planning such as that advocated by McHarg, certain areas are left undeveloped because of physical qualities that make them unsuitable for development (floodplain, soil conditions, aquifer protection, etc.), simultaneously creating an open space amenity (McHarg). Unfortunately, in most metropolitan areas, development has not followed such guidelines.

## **Public involvement**

Public involvement offers opportunities for sharing and receiving information, and for broadening the support of agency activities through increased awareness and appreciation. (Creighton; Howell et al.; Rosenbaum). In a democratic society, public involvement creates opportunities for citizens to hold government accountable and to exercise skills that are necessary for maintaining democratic institutions. Public involvement also provides the opportunity for citizens to feel a sense of ownership in a project. If people work on a project from the initial stages and are able to participate in the decision-making process, they will be more willing to accept the final plan. At the same

time, administrators may fear public involvement for the potential conflict and obstacles it may raise for an otherwise straightforward project, or because of the typical anxiety that accompanies public speaking.

Even where strong arguments can be made for the creation of new types of policy or social change, such substantive environmental quality goals should not neglect process goals such as the capacity of citizens and communities to govern themselves (Ingram and Smith). After a major increase during the late sixties and early seventies, citizen involvement appears to be stagnant, if not in decline.

## **Toledo, Ohio, and its metro-urban interface**

Toledo lies at the western end of Lake Erie, at the mouth of the Maumee River, which drains northwest Ohio and parts of northeastern Indiana. Toledo and the surrounding communities in Ohio and Michigan have experienced many problems common to the midwest's industrial belt (Toledo 1970a). Jobs and economic development are the unchallenged leaders in political platform issues. Although urban and suburban growth have been slow-paced compared to many metropolitan areas, the region illustrates the growing donut pattern of outward spread and inner city deterioration. Leaders have not realized that attracting economic development relies to a significant degree on the quality of life in a geographic area. Northern Wood County and the outlying areas of Lucas County are prime economic development areas, due in part to their rural character. Use of land in these rural areas should be planned to avoid the loss of the present quality of life.

## **Growth**

Uncontrolled growth on the edge of metropolitan areas has also intensified the problems of inner cities (Downs; Smith). Toledo is a prime example of this phenomenon. The downtown area has declined as the suburban areas have grown. Inner city Toledo's decline has been accompanied by crime and poverty, and a great deal of developable land in the city is unused. The urban sprawl from Toledo has extended into northern Wood County, creating concerns about

depleting farmland and remaining natural areas, and spreading "urban" problems.

### Recreation and open space

There is relatively little recreational open space available for the area's population. Lucas County, which contains Toledo, has nearly half a million people, and approximately 70 acres of outdoor recreation land per thousand population. To the south, Wood County is more than 88 percent agricultural and contains less than half a percent of land for outdoor recreation, with 17 acres per thousand population (Ohio Department of Natural Resources; Toledo 1970b). Adjacent Lake Erie has less public shoreline access than any other coast in the United States (Ohio Lake Erie Office). In other areas of Ohio, groups have begun to take an active role in efforts to direct land use and conservation, but the Toledo area has not yet supported such activities (Institute for Environmental Education).

### Farmland

Farmland is being lost at an alarming rate to urban/suburban development (Endicott; Thompson). In Wood County, valuable farmland is being taken out of production as farmers sell property with road frontage or for new subdivisions. In the short term, this may not give rise to concern. In the long term, many concerns may arise, such as drainage problems, herbicide and pesticide drift, farmland litter, water pollution from inadequate or poorly maintained septic systems, and other concerns related to the extension of utilities.

In conservative agricultural areas such as northwest Ohio, it is hard to sustain excitement over loss of farmland, as the federal government pays farmers to keep land out of production. Farmers also realize great gains when they sell fields for residential, commercial, or industrial property, and there is reluctance to limit such a privilege. Because farmers are the target of environmentalist criticism for soil loss and pesticides, there are attitudinal barriers to forming coalitions.

### Planning and zoning

Planning and zoning authority rests with township, village, and city boards and commissions, although county planning departments assist on coordinating across the unincorporated townships. In Wood County, local planning and zoning commissions promote the preservation of open space through set-aside regulations. This requires a land developer to set aside a percentage of the acreage to be developed as dedicated open space. Another option is to pay a percentage of the value of the land to be developed to the planning commission for the purpose of purchasing open space or improving a park facility. In the case of Wood County,

this provides little protection for unique lands. In addition, the developers often choose to set aside land that is useless in terms of any park or public use. Township authority creates the tendency for micro-level land use planning rather than the macro-level perspective needed for open space planning. Regional coordination is necessary to assess the changing boundary of the urban and rural interface.

For transportation and environmental planning, the Toledo Metropolitan Area Council of Governments (TMACOG) serves a complex assortment of local jurisdictions. However, TMACOG has no authority of its own and relies on the willingness of its member communities to carry out its plans. Because centralized regional government does not appear to be politically feasible, a new way of thinking and planning among independent jurisdictions and their citizens that addresses these problems is needed.

### Need for research

Research on public agencies has not addressed the question of the difficulty that citizens may experience when a policy issue requires planning and decisions from multiple governmental jurisdictions. Following the relevant decision processes for open space protection around a metropolitan area is no simple task for citizens, whether they are antagonistic watchdogs or cooperative volunteers. Citizens encounter numerous such transaction costs when they deal with any single bureaucracy (Warren and Weschler). Broad networks for regional issues such as open space planning are difficult to initiate and maintain.

The goal of the project described in this paper is to help build a public constituency across multiple jurisdictions for open space planning and preservation while simultaneously contributing to the knowledge and skill base for participatory processes. The research described is a form of action research, in which the investigators recognize their role as potential influences in the policy and governance processes investigated.

### Methods

The research consisted of a mailed questionnaire and a focus group discussion to assess the interest and awareness of open space issues in the region and to take the first step in preparing to coordinate across jurisdictions.

*The questionnaire.* A questionnaire was mailed to all elected and appointed general-purpose government officials and to all staff officials in land-use related positions who were listed as working for jurisdictions that are members of the Toledo Metropolitan Area Council of Governments (TMACOG), to managers of state agencies, conservation dis-

tricts, and to contacts in regional interest groups with an interest in open space protection. The list of local and state officials was obtained from the TMACOG membership directory, and the interest group contacts were taken from two lists of Ohio environmental organizations.

The questionnaire contained five sections. The first section used closed-ended questions and asked respondents to assess regional open space planning and protection. The second section's closed-ended questions asked respondents to assess the level of public interest and education on open space issues, and open-ended questions sought comments on the respondent's experience with public involvement. The third section asked respondents to name the organizations and individuals most involved in open space protection issues, in four different categories: public agencies, non-governmental organizations, private consulting or planning or design companies, and individuals. The fourth section contained open-ended questions pertaining to the respondent's organization's activities related to open space, such as standing committees, projects, or plans related to open space. Respondents were asked about the involvement of other agencies or organizations in such projects, and asked to list open-space-related public meetings from the last three years. Additional questions asked for respondent interest in workshops on public involvement and focus groups on coordinating public participation in open space planning and protection. The fifth section sought any additional comments about the topic or the project.

Three hundred and ninety questionnaires were mailed to representatives of 180 different agencies and organizations. Overlap within organizations occurred as a result of including multiple elected and appointed officials, and managers of specific divisions or departments. This strategy was adopted to attempt to directly contact all potentially interested parties. Eleven questionnaires were returned in the mail, bringing the distribution down to three hundred and seventy-nine. Postcard reminders were mailed three weeks later. Fifty responses were received prior to the focus group, and three more later.

We received fifty usable responses from seven county-based agencies (two park districts, two soil and water conservation districts, one planning commission, one farm bureau, and one cooperative extension office), three cities, six municipal park departments or commissions, four villages, thirteen townships, one regional

planning entity (TMACOG), four non-profit groups, five units of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (including Natural Areas, Real Estate and Land Management, Wildlife, and Maumee Bay State Park) and one district office of the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency. Five respondents did not indicate their agency or organization.

While on the surface this is only a 12 percent return rate, we can partially attribute the low numbers to the phenomenon of several members of the same jurisdiction pooling their answers into one representative response. The response rate improves to 28 percent if one considers the number of organizations contacted, rather than the number of individuals. We must also interpret an unknown proportion of non-responses as either disinterest or opposition to open space protection issues.

### The focus group

A focus group composed of interested respondents met on May 6 to review the questionnaire results, suggest research needs, and explore opportunities for interjurisdictional cooperation on public education in this area. One of the mailed questionnaire items had asked respondents to indicate if they or someone from their organization would be interested in attending a follow-up focus group on open space issues. Those thirty-three respondents answering affirmatively were invited to the focus group, to be held at Bowling Green State University. The invitation explained the questionnaire results would be presented and that discussion questions would focus on different types of open space protection and the possibility of coordinating public education and planning efforts. Three time slots of two hours on Friday, May 6th, were offered. Only nine individuals indicated that they would be able to attend, so the time slot of 9 am to 11 am, the preference of most of the nine, was chosen for the focus group. Six people, representing local governments or departments and some non-government groups, attended the session.

Written summaries and brief analyses of the questionnaire responses were provided to participants, with discussion questions for each section. The group went through each section together, and then responses to each discussion question were recorded on paper on an easel at the front of the room, with filled pages taped to the wall nearby where

everyone could see them (Moore). The meeting was tape-recorded.

### Results

**The questionnaire responses.** A review of the questionnaire responses suggests that the pool of respondents was skewed toward an over-representation of people with concerns about open space protection. The main value of the results was as a stimulus for the focus group discussion.

**Assessment of regional open space planning and protection.** Ninety percent of questionnaire respondents indicated they were very concerned (28) or concerned (17) about regional open space protection. Eighty-two percent of the respondents indicated that open space protection is inadequate for future needs; 42 percent also believe that open space protection is inadequate for present needs. Sixty-four percent (32) believe that implementation of open space protection goals is behind schedule or not proceeding at all. Of these, eight believe implementation is slightly behind, 13 believe it is very behind, and 11 believe it is not proceeding at all. Eight respondents said implementation of open space protection goals is ahead of or on schedule. These responses indicate that most of the respondents are strongly concerned with open space protection, with different degrees of urgency over the issue.

**Public interest and involvement.** Eighty-two percent of survey respondents felt that the public is not educated enough on the importance of open space protection. Sixty-four percent felt that there is not enough public interest in open space protection. Eighteen percent were unsure, and 14 percent felt there is enough interest.

On the questions of positive or unfavorable experiences with public involvement activities, 40 percent reported mixed experiences, 22 percent reported good experiences, and 12 percent reported very positive experiences. A range of comments were made regarding the best and worst parts of public involvement experiences. Some respondents indicated different types of problems, while others named specific events. Eighty percent felt that efforts should be made to coordinate public involvement on open space protection.

Respondents agreed that there is a lack of public education on open space protection, and that coordinating public involvement efforts would be a good idea. A majority also agreed on a current lack of public interest in the issue. The range of positive and negative experiences with

public involvement activities, combined with the other responses to this set of questions, suggests a variety of issues that might be addressed in coordinating and training for public involvement activities.

**Organizations and groups most involved in open space protection.** The purpose of this portion of the questionnaire was to identify those public agencies, non-governmental organizations, private companies, and individuals who are regionally known as being involved in open space issues. The most extensive responses came from organizations that are themselves significantly involved in open space issues (e.g., TMACOG and the Monroe County Planning Commission).

Seventy-eight percent of respondents listed one or more agencies. Toledo Metroparks, the special district serving the natural area and recreation needs of Lucas County, was mentioned most frequently. Toledo Metroparks manages several parks and natural areas, including Oak Openings, a nature preserve of more than 3,800 acres. Planning and zoning commissions and local governments were mentioned next most frequently. TMACOG was listed next, followed by other specific local boards and commissions.

Forty-six percent of respondents listed one or more non-governmental organizations. Sierra Club was mentioned most often, followed by a number of small groups associated with specific locations. Other specific groups were listed, including Audubon Society, Pheasants Forever, and various farm organizations. Twenty-eight percent listed one or more private companies. Thirty-four percent of the respondents listed one or more individuals. No individual was listed more than four times.

**Agency or organization experiences.** Sixty-eight percent (34) of the respondents had committees or projects related to open space issues. Of these, 26 reported having committees that consider issues involving open space, and 29 reported being involved currently in plans or projects.

Forty-eight percent (24) of the respondents listed other agencies or organizations that are involved in either the planning or implementation of their group's or agency's projects. Twenty-two respondents involved in committee or project work also coordinated with other agencies or organizations. Twelve involved in committee or project work did not coordinate with other agencies or organizations. Most of these listed planning or zoning boards or projects. Two coordinated with others without listing committees or projects. Thirteen indicated no committee work, projects, or coordination. Among respondents, approximately half have standing committees or divisions

concerned with open space issues, and approximately half are currently involved in related projects. Sixty-five percent of those involved in committee work or projects also coordinate with other agencies or groups, indicating a strong potential for also coordinating public involvement activities.

Only 18 percent of respondents indicated their agency or group had scheduled any public meetings on open space issues in the last three years. The variety of open-space related topics and meeting formats included the following:

1. Monroe County Planning Commission (presentation of Land Use Tools and Techniques handbook to South East Michigan Council of Governments);
2. Wood County Park District (Board meetings, Friends of the Parks);
3. Toledo Department of Natural Resources (Buckeye Basin, ongoing advisory; group meetings);
4. Bowling Green (Airport environmental assessment);
5. Maumee Bay State Park (ongoing curriculum and programming);
6. Springfield Township (ongoing rezoning issues);
7. Riga Township (sewer and water, industry, sludge application);
8. League of Women Voters (review of Master Plan, update of land use; position)
9. Pemberville Village Council (maintenance and improvements for local park)

We suspect that there were more public meetings than are indicated by the responses. Respondents may have found the question too time-consuming to research.

**Interest in further activities.** Seventy-four percent of respondents indicated interest in a workshop on conducting public involvement activities. Sixty-six percent were interested in a focus group on coordinating public participation in open space planning and protection. These results indicate that among respondents there appears to be a significant interest in further development of public involvement leadership skills and regional coordination of public involvement activities.

### Focus group discussion

**Assessment of regional open space planning and protection.** For the focus group, open space concerns and priorities included natural areas and rivers, water quality, growth/urban sprawl controls, flooding (both from crowding river channels and the increase in hard surfaces), and agricultural land protection. There was strong agreement that open space protection is a component of a needed overall shift in regional awareness to place

a higher priority on the longterm costs and benefits of different types of growth over short-term costs and benefits.

The focus group identified several obstacles to achieving open space protection goals. First, the region's political priorities are elsewhere, on issues such as crime and jobs. Regulatory and tax incentives have been moving industry into rural areas. Re-developing inner cities is a very complicated problem. Protection of open space is reactionary rather than proactive, since we have a base of two hundred years of unplanned development. New housing developments meet the needs of people wanting more space, and there is an anti-regulatory mood in the region's electorate. The effects of deteriorating water quality and the loss of open space are so indirect and gradual that they fail to attract sustained public interest. The focus group also felt that appointed officials need to be educated on open space issues.

The authors were interested in the focus group participants' view of how open space needs and economic development needs could be made to work together. In a discussion of the issues that separate open space from development thinking, the group repeated the theme that the short-term benefits of many economic development achievements hide their long-term costs. Part of the problem is that many area residents do not have a long-term commitment to the area. The concern for jobs is greater than the concern for natural resources, and within the region, there is a competitive market for development. People move to semi-rural areas for amenity values, and then want to shut the door behind them. The planning ordinance for housing developments that requires open space set-asides is often met in the letter but not the spirit of the rule, and some people in the area consider the rule to be a takings issue.

To fold open space concerns into economic development activities, the group suggested making it a criteria of all planned projects. To accomplish this, education of officials but also of the communities in the region was suggested. Gathering public support from a number of groups known for their public concerns was recommended as a strategy for public education and creating a political base. Effectively using the media, both print and TV, was recommended as a powerful opinion shaper. Linking pass-through dollars to regional planning, as is practiced in the Twin Cities metropolitan area, was also seen as a powerful way to require open space considerations.

**Public interest and involvement.** Focus

group participants developed a list of strategies and topics to establish a foundation for people prior to participating in public involvement activities, primarily to convey the idea of longterm thinking in relation to economic and environmental costs and benefits. They recommended targeting high schools, others suggested working with lower grades, because kids tell their parents. Follow-through with people who express interest was seen as a key strategy.

Possible topics for media and education forums included the following:

1. linkage between water quality and land use;
2. benefits of greenstrips along fields;
3. outdoors and area wildlife;
4. environmental impact of transportation and roads; and
5. politics and environmental impact of water sales and extending service.

The desired outcome would be increased responsiveness to longterm needs by key decision makers. Open space protection and the several related concerns would benefit from this way of thinking.

**Interest in further activities.** The focus group participants suggested several ideas for a format for public involvement education activities that could serve as a regional approach to open space planning. One strong suggestion was to utilize the format of the local public television station's "Journal" program, which focuses on local public issues. These are operated as call-in shows. Another suggestion was to link up with the Open Space working group of the Maumee Remedial Action Plan, which is working on the environmental quality of one of Lake Erie's toxic "hot spots." Controlling urban runoff was a topic suggested in this area.

The major obstacle to developing any forum or education project was seen to be the lack of money. Focus group participants even seemed suspicious that one purpose of the focus group was to ask participating representatives to seek funding from their organizations, which was not the intent at all! Once that point was made clear, participants expressed interest in developing internships for graduate students to work and do research in this area.

## Conclusions

The questionnaire responses and focus group comment show that there are several tiers of interest in open space protection in the Toledo metropolitan area. Focus group participants, other respondents who indicated interest but were unable to attend, and organizations and individuals identified in the question-

naire as very involved in open space issues make up the latent leadership of the constituency base for open space protection in the Toledo Metropolitan Area.

Public involvement processes appear to be an underutilized technique for planning and constituency development in the region. There are many different public and private groups and individuals with actual or potential jurisdiction over the preservation or development of open space, yet few encourage public involvement beyond minimum requirements. The low level of participatory activity at this stage means that there is a great opportunity to establish cooperative efforts before the issue becomes heated enough that separate jurisdictions running separate processes would be a problem in the region.

Present efforts to protect open space are proceeding separately, often by a single government or a private group. In order for adequate protection to be accomplished for human and wildlife needs, coordination and planning among the several types of jurisdictions and organizations are needed, based firmly on a strengthened public awareness of the issue. Focus group participants firmly believed increased public awareness must be the first step.

The focus group advocated the development of a regional identity through public education as a step toward a more sustainable stewardship. Participants felt strongly that increasing the depth of public awareness of the longterm costs and benefits of development and environmental quality was the key to changing the practices of the political leadership. The first step of the project has confirmed a need for multi-research and service strategies.

Research can play a role in developing issue awareness. This role was consciously adopted to create a foundation in the region for future coordination among the respondents. By taking this approach, the authors are able to proactively facilitate the development of constituent networks and in the future will be able to incorporate information about different aspects of open space and citizen participation into follow-up questionnaires. The philosophy is to take an undeveloped policy issue and forge a strong link between its development and the positive development of democratic processes and skills in the region. Organizing workshops and conferences on open space protection and farmland preservation may at first only reach people who are already interested, so it is likely that the construction of a constituency will take several years. Getting the attention of an unmobilized public is a challenge, as the loss of a re-

gion's open space is dispersed and incremental rather than a sudden catastrophe. The potential for coordination exists, but must wait for the region's public to develop its awareness of the lands that have the characteristics which make them appropriate to remain as open space. ❄

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