

## Book Review: Slow Democracy

Dysfunction is so much the name of the game in Washington these days that we are not surprised that Congress can accomplish almost nothing. On occasion, state governments seem almost as unable to solve their constituents' problems – yet there is a bright light embodied in local government. “Slow Democracy,” by Susan Clark (Middlesex town moderator) and Woden Teachout, is a new book that demonstrates the need for our involvement in government decisions, and how U.S. citizens, are reclaiming their local government traditions, recovering control of decisions that directly affect themselves, and achieving outcomes that benefit the cities and towns in which they live.

This is an activist's book that points to emergent collaborative decision-making – a style of ideas and innovations coming together in sometimes random ways to produce a result greater than its individual parts. Think of open-source software, flashmobs, the internet. What is interesting for local government officials is that the closeness to neighbors and the inherent transparency of its functioning (relative to a state or, certainly, the federal government) gives rise to collaborative decision-making and many heads in the huddle in times of crisis. Vermonters certainly experienced the irrepressibility of emergent action in the wake of Tropical Storm Irene. Clark and Teachout provide examples of people reviving vibrant and effective democratic governments around the country. “In many public arenas across the United States,” they write, “on issues ranging from schools to public lands, planning to budgeting, public safety to the treatment of criminals through such programs as community diversion, leaders are in desperate need of the energy and expertise that strong community

engagement will offer. And citizens are diving in to help.”

Coming to a consensus among disparate parts of a community about how to solve a problem is not easy, however – as we all know and as the authors explain. Nor may it be desirable in some circumstances, once we have slowed down to listen to each other and understand the different challenges a problem presents to different people. The authors describe a methodology that involves three ingredients for local democratic decision-making: inclusion, deliberation, and power. They then provide a “how to” for not only accomplishing quality inclusion and deliberation but also respecting that commitment from citizens by assessing how, when, how extensively, and where power is shared. And of course in this last regard, Vermont is way ahead of the curve because in most of its municipalities, town meeting is the governing body that adopts the budget and from which authority flows.

Even Vermont could do better with its town meetings. To find out how, you would do well to read “Slow Democracy.”

“Slow Democracy: Rediscovering Community, Bringing Decision Making Back Home”  
by Susan Clark and Woden Teachout  
280 pages, Chesea Green Publishing (Oct. 2012).

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