



What's Your Problem?

Defining the Challenge that Active Citizenship Can Solve

“Let’s work the problem, people.”

—Gene Kranz (Ed Harris) in *Apollo 13*

Case in Point: A Road Through the Mountains

For the residents of Jackson County, North Carolina, their area’s richest blessing has also turned out to be its worst curse. Wedged between the hills of South Carolina and the heart of the Appalachian Mountain chain, Jackson County is one of the most picturesque locales in the United States. With its green mountains, brilliant autumns, and relatively mild summers, it is little wonder that Scotch-Irish Protestants used to life in the Scottish Highlands founded Jackson County in the 1850s.

For its first century Jackson County was remote and isolated, its stunning beauty known only to residents and a few visitors. That all changed in the 1960s, when Americans discovered the well-kept secret. For the next five decades Jackson County’s population kept growing—more than doubling from 17,780 in 1960 to an estimated 36,751 in 2007. When Western Carolina University opened in 1964, in the Jackson County town of Cullowhee, it had 2,659 students. In 2008 enrollment had skyrocketed to 9,055. But the surge in the number of permanent residents and students

is only half the story. It does not account for the tens of thousands of visitors who annually seek temporary refuge in the cool mountain air, crystal clear lakes and streams, and tranquility of mountain life. From April to October towns such as Cashiers in Jackson County and Highlands in nearby Macon County are crawling with travelers from all fifty states.

As it always does, growth has brought change to Jackson County. Skeptics need look no further than NC 107, a north-south thoroughfare that mostly parallels the rippling, white-foamed Tuckasegee River. This rural, winding two-lane strip is today lined with the tell-tale signs of urbanization: tourist motels, boat rental shops, gas stations, Wal-Mart's, and fast-food franchises. The asphalt is sagging under the increased traffic, which frequently comes to a standstill when parts of the road are closed to accommodate maintenance crews or cleanups after accidents.

In the face of this explosive growth and the resulting strain on the area's infrastructure, Jackson County leaders convened a series of public meetings in 2000 to determine the public's sentiments on possible responses to the population explosion. At these meetings residents voiced overwhelming support for "smart" growth that would enhance their mountain communities and protect the heritage and beauty of the valleys and hilltops.

Some community leaders created a new initiative to give even louder voice to that sentiment. In 2001 the Tuckasegee Community Alliance began meeting to assess growth management in the county. One year later the group took on a new name and sharper focus: the Jackson County Smart Roads Alliance (<http://wnc.us/smartroads>).

At its first meeting under the new name, in September 2002, members of the alliance advocated a comprehensive approach to Jackson County's traffic problems. Their recommendations included transportation planning, which would start with a feasibility study of NC 107; a possible redesign of roadside development; and other initiatives to maintain the community's character

and preserve open spaces. This approach took official form in November 2002, when Jackson County and the towns of Sylva and Webster formally requested that the North Carolina Department of Transportation conduct a comprehensive traffic management study of NC 107.

The department complied but only to a point. In the summer of 2003 it released a less-than-comprehensive study on one option: a proposal to build two bypass roads around Sylva, Jackson County's largest town and county seat, to alleviate the congestion on NC 107. According to the plan each segment would consist of a four-lane highway. One of the roads, commonly referred to as the Southern Loop, quickly became a source of great controversy. As designed, the bypass would cause the loss of ninety-four homes and five businesses, and it would have a significant impact on the county's farms, woodlands, and wetlands.

But the greater controversy was the Transportation Department's apparent determination to define the issue with a single choice—whether or not to build both the Northern and the Southern Loops. The department's refusal to consider a more comprehensive set of options ignited the traditionally serene populace of Jackson County. In response, the alliance took steps that would ultimately force all participants to view the debate in broader terms in 2003 and beyond.

First, the alliance, which was often viewed as a group of outsiders, had the good fortune to find two leaders with local credibility. Harold and Gwen Messer believed in the "cause." Their home, like those of hundreds of other Jackson County families, was in the path of the Southern Loop. The Messers, who are respected general contractors and church members, led the way in getting the larger community involved. When others said the road was a done deal, Herald and Gwen refused to believe it. Both Messers were savvy in shaping the message and in raising money. Together with their friends and allies they raised money from prominent individuals and organized barbeque dinners with

donated food from local restaurants. The money raised was spent in ways that broadened the debate—such as paying for critical advertising and retaining a traffic expert and consultant whose opinions brought credibility to the alliance’s arguments.

Second, the alliance identified other Jackson County residents who should have been involved earlier but were unaware of their stake in the outcome. A North Carolina law required county governments to advertise the names of all property owners delinquent in their taxes. Jackson County residents had long been so interested in these notices that the local newspaper printed extra copies to meet the demand. Knowing that many people who read that edition of the newspaper would be affected by the proposed corridors but were unaware of their significance, the alliance paid for a newspaper advertisement that resembled the property tax notice—but it instead listed all of the residents who would be affected by the proposed highways. When the notice ran in the newspaper, local residents bombarded the Transportation Department with complaints and joined the alliance en masse. Jackson County and the municipalities of Sylva, Webster, and Dillsboro passed resolutions of opposition to the Southern Loop.

Third, the alliance rested on a broad base of support. Concerns about Jackson County road construction cut across political lines. In keeping with the old adage that politics makes for strange bedfellows, the alliance was a big tent under which conservatives, community activists, environmentalists, preservationists, and even some business leaders opposed the Southern Loop.

Fourth, the alliance targeted specific allies to help frame the debate. It sought advice from the Southern Environmental Law Center, in Asheville, and reached out to young people. These new friends brought new skills, such as the best ways to obtain government records, organize and conduct meetings, and turn the alliance into an Internal Revenue Service–approved organization that could raise tax-deductible contributions. Even more important, the inclusion of future Jackson County leaders helped to

make the debate about more than just roads. Their presence helped the alliance to focus attention on the mountains, rivers, forests, and future generations of the community that the new highways would affect.

Fifth, the alliance relied on experts whose opinions carried weight with decision makers. Some of the earliest opposition to the Southern Loop came from prominent citizens in Webster, the historical seat of Jackson County. Malcolm McNeill a local developer, was one of those leaders. McNeill found Walter Kulash, a nationally known traffic engineer, to advise opponents of the road about possible alternatives to the new four-lane highway. Kulash voiced an expert's opinion that North Carolina Department of Transportation officials would listen to. Additionally, the alliance provided the public with information from experts on alternative transportation. Among them was Dan Burden, a national advocate for "walkable communities." In 2003 the town of Sylva officially incorporated the goal of becoming a walkable community into its long-term planning vision.

Sixth, the alliance developed reasonable alternatives to the Transportation Department's "build or no build" choice. In this task the alliance was aided mightily by the ingenuity of Jim Aust, Sylva's town planner. In 2003, after carefully studying area traffic patterns, Aust proposed a network of new two-lane roads that would connect preexisting roads to NC 107, thus funneling traffic away from that busy highway. The alliance also recommended the examination of all proposals related to 107 to determine secondary impacts, such as possible pollution of the Tuckasegee River. This switch from defense to offense enabled the alliance to challenge the department's position more effectively. Jackson County Smart Roads avoided the trap into which many citizen initiatives fall: expressing opposition to a proposal without offering a proposal of its own. The alliance's years-long effort to expand the debate beyond a single construction proposal has made some notable achievements. Jackson County created a transportation task force

to study the road issue and appointed two alliance members to the group. A headline in the *Sylva Herald*, December 11, 2008, spoke the loudest about how far the alliance had come: “DOT Officials Say They’ll Explore All Options for 107.”¹ The North Carolina Department of Transportation plans to spend the next three years studying alternatives, conducting environmental-impact studies, and collecting input from citizens at public hearings and workshops before choosing a course of action in late 2012. Whether the alliance ultimately succeeds in its objectives remains to be seen, but for now to build or not to build is no longer the only question.

HOW TO DEFINE THE PROBLEM

You know the feeling. You’re listening to a speaker, watching television news, reading the newspaper, or even talking to friends or family. You may be registering for classes or trying to secure housing for the next academic year. You could be paying for electricity, property taxes, or a doctor’s bill that the health insurance you can’t afford would have covered. You might even be walking through a neighborhood park, canoeing down a river, or visiting a national park when it hits you. Something isn’t right. You feel upset, even angry. Righteous indignation swells within you, and you find yourself saying something like, “There should be a law!” or “If only I were king or queen for a day!”

That feeling is the launching pad for active citizenship. When something you see, hear, read, or experience in your community causes you great anger or worry, and you realize that democratic institutions—the school board, city council, mayor, state legislature, governor, or even the U.S. Congress or president—have the power to address your concern, you are ready to embark on your journey as an active citizen.

¹ Stephanie Salmons and Lynn Hotaling, “DOT Officials Say They’ll Explore All Options for 107,” *Sylva Herald*, December 11, 2008.

A Chinese proverb says that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Your first step in launching a citizen initiative is to understand and clearly state the problem you want to fix. Be specific and realistic. “I want my community to be a better place to live” is a nice sentiment with which almost everyone can agree, but it is far too broad and vague to be useful. More focused starting points might include the following:

- We don't feel safe because crime has increased in our area.
- Our neighborhood drinking water looks, smells, and tastes odd.
- In the past year my property taxes have doubled.
- My small business is losing workers because I can't afford their health insurance.
- Our daughter is one of thirty-five children in a single kindergarten class.
- The state wants to build a new expressway that would increase the noise level at my house.

Do you see the difference? The statement of the first problem is so nebulous that the democratic process would not be able to address it. On the other hand, the latter statements address particular concerns for which citizen action may produce results.

When you feel anger, concern, or a passionate desire for change rising up inside you, consider whether the source of that feeling could become a political issue. Many people miss the potential for citizen action when they ignore these gut reactions to local issues.

Take this example: At a university's foreign language studies conference, the program director announces that undergraduate foreign language course offerings are being cut. The students in the audience are dismayed. How can they continue their studies with fewer language courses? One faculty member observes that the issue is one of choices: The university has prioritized academic subjects, and languages didn't make the cut. The professor urges the students to organize a plan for citizen action to force a reexamination of the

choices made. The students have been confronted with an issue that is vital to their academic and professional careers. This is their moment to exercise active citizenship. With the right definition of the problem, they could begin the process of convincing the university to see foreign language instruction as a vital tool in preparing students to compete in the accelerating global economy. But the students appear unable or unwilling to believe they have the power to reverse the university's decision, and their lack of faith makes the decision that much more final.

Once you have concluded that your concern can be addressed through citizen action, the following five steps will help you define it in the manner most likely to produce a positive result.

1. Look with a Telescope, not a Microscope

Place the problem you have identified in a larger context. If you do this, you may find that others have the same concern—and that the community faces a collective challenge that requires a democratic response. For example, if you notice that your or your child's chemistry textbook is twenty years out of date, others may have the same concern with other academic texts. Because your local school board or university administration is much more likely to address an across-the-board problem than one that affects only a single student, school, or subject, you can define the problem as inadequate textbooks throughout the entire university or school system—not just in your particular class or school.

2. Focus the Telescope If Necessary

Politics is the art of the possible, and sometimes it is necessary to narrow the larger context if the wide-angle view presents an out-sized target. For example, you may be a local hardware store owner who is concerned that your state's taxation system does not treat small businesses fairly. However, you are even more concerned about the competitive advantage that Internet hardware suppliers enjoy. You are required to collect sales taxes when your

customers buy hammers in your store. Because your Internet competitors can escape that requirement, they can sell hammers for less than you do. If you learn that the state is scheduled to explore the issue of sales tax fairness, and you want to present your side of the issue, you will increase your chances of addressing the most important part of the problem if you define and focus it as an Internet sales tax collection issue and leave other perceived tax inequities for future citizen action. As I will discuss more in chapter 6, timing is everything when it comes to influencing policymakers.

3. Define the Problem in Political Terms

Whether you want to improve your neighborhood park or alter U.S.–Middle Eastern relations, your goal is to change policy. Your definition of the problem should either implicitly or explicitly identify the desired outcome. Campaign Georgetown, which was discussed in the prologue, is a perfect example. When the Advisory Neighborhood Commission took steps to prevent students from parking and living in the neighborhoods surrounding Georgetown University, more than 1,000 students suddenly faced serious threats to their transportation and housing. Their problem was the indifference of ANC members to student concerns, and that problem suggested a solution: Elect new ANC members who would listen to students.

4. Define the Problem in Public Terms

Political consultants correctly tell their candidates that voters will usually remember no more than a sentence or two about them. Depending on the size of the electorate and the office being sought, thousands or even millions of dollars are devoted to ensuring that voters remember the right sentence or two when they see a particular candidate's name on the ballot. Similarly, you need to brand your issue in a succinct yet memorable way that drives home your central goal.

One group of motivated and creative citizens did exactly that in persuading voters to put new environmental protections in the Florida Constitution. This coalition was alarmed at the rate of development that was burying the state's coastal areas in condominiums, destroying forest lands, and paving over wetlands; its members wanted to find ways to preserve more land for public use. They sought to persuade the state legislature to put two constitutional amendments on the next general election ballot—each to earmark a portion of the state real estate transfer tax for public land acquisition. The legislature agreed, even though many of those who voted to put the amendments on the ballot secretly believed they had no chance of passage in a state that prided itself on economic growth and individual property rights.

Early in the legislative session the environmental advocates had secured the first and second general election ballot spots for constitutional amendments. They would be pushing Amendments 1 and 2, and they turned that favorable placement into a memorable slogan: $1 + 2 = \text{Lands for You}$. When Election Day arrived, most voters knew that mantra by heart. The campaign imprinted all of its materials with the catchy label and unveiled two signature images: one, a lake with happy campers in canoes and, two, a pastoral wetlands landscape. A volunteer songwriter penned a $1 + 2$ jingle, and the campaign gave donors its two signature images to distribute to other possible supporters. At every rally, press conference, and public appearance, the proponents of Amendments 1 and 2 drove home the point that the preserved lands “would be for you.” Voters remembered that when they walked into polling places and overwhelmingly adopted the amendments.

5. Repeat, Repeat, Repeat the Problem

Over the next few chapters, you will learn many skills to help make your citizen initiative a success. But even as you build coalitions, engage the media, test the waters of public opinion, and gather information, your definition of the challenge to be resolved is the

North Star of your efforts. This statement of the problem is your inspiration, and to lose sight of it is to abandon the very concern that motivated you to act in the first place. Summarize your problem in a single sentence, and repeat it to yourself before and during each step in the process outlined in the pages ahead. You won't get lost if you hold tight to your compass.

CHECKLIST FOR ACTION

- Look with a telescope, not a microscope.
- Focus the telescope if necessary.
- Define the problem in political terms.
- Define the problem in public terms.
- Repeat, repeat, repeat the problem.

Exercises

YOU HAVE A PROBLEM

Welcome to the exciting world of citizen participation in democracy. When you have finished reading this book, you should have a clear understanding of the skills needed to navigate your campus, local, state, or federal government. But the first step is to select a campus or community problem you want to solve and define it in a focused way. Think carefully about life at your college or university or in your local community or state. Identify a challenge that government at some level is uniquely positioned to address. Select your problem carefully. Throughout this book, it will be the issue on which you practice each of your new citizenship skills. As I noted in the introduction, the class I taught at Miami Carol City High School in 1974 based one-third of the final grade on how effective students were in solving their problem. Be forewarned: Your professor might have a similar performance-based evaluation for you.