

## **Tipping Points and Firestorms ~ Musings on Human and Institutional Relationships**

*Sometimes you never realize that something might explode in your face until after your eyebrows are singed. In retrospect there are usually warnings that a fuse has been lit, but often you're too close to the coming conflagration to comprehend what's about to happen, let alone move to a different place. This paper looks at a collaboration between a local community and a university that comes apart and sets the stage for ongoing difficulties.*

The original tipping point came when the second attempt to bid out wastewater system installations went up in flames in October 2006.

The federal EPA had awarded our County Commission funds for an Alternative Wastewater Demonstration Project as part of the 2003 federal appropriations bill. The \$1 million award was one of six nation-wide projects. Its goal was to install high tech, alternative wastewater systems in individual homes in a rural, low income watershed and demonstrate that this would help clean up bacterial levels in creeks and rivers. Yet before EPA was willing to release the funds, the County had to find additional experts for the project. As the university local County Extension Agent who was switching positions to become the project director, I had organizing skills and historic links to the local community and county. What I didn't have in EPA's eyes were proven skills in wastewater engineering and water quality analysis. Housed on the university's campus was a national research center. The center had experience in both wastewater and tributary water quality. With urging from Extension directors at the university, the County Commission entered into an agreement in which two researchers from the center would work as co-investigators on the project. F. in wastewater and M. in water quality had academic credentials, published researched papers, and the kind of credibility EPA wanted. There was a disconnect between them and me, greater than the four hour driving time separating the university from the watershed in our county where the project was taking place. The three of us approached working with the community much differently. Perhaps because they had been stung before, F. and M. were very uncomfortable sharing information with the local people. There was what seemed like a constant worry that something said would later turn out to be incorrect, leading local people to get angry and upset. I think, too, they were both uncomfortable with us at the local level sharing project financial updates, including all salaries and benefits, and reaffirming that the local community would be equal players in project decision making. Questions from local people about appropriate wastewater technologies and potential short term and long term system costs were often

answered vaguely with qualifiers like “we can’t be that specific just yet.” For me, power over decision making was linked to knowledge about wastewater issues. That meant that knowledge was never neutral. Who had it, in effect, controlled how decisions would be made. And as the community felt knowledge was being withheld, their discontent grew.

Engagement with local communities was something I’d been interested in for years, especially after reading Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution. This 1999 report was prepared by the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities. It stressed the importance of community engagement in the mission of land-grant universities, and defined this, in part, as respect for local communities.

My own experiences as a tenured university faculty member and as a community activist had taught me that too often, universities with their knowledge and expertise, assume they have all the tools needed to make correct and appropriate decisions for communities. University faculty regularly believe they are in a better position to make good decisions than un(under)trained and un(under)educated community members. As a result, the university decides for the community. Yet, the assumption that the university knows best is not always correct. Local communities have strengths, knowledge, and insights that the university does not have. Those qualities which local communities bring into decision making frequently are the very elements which guarantee a project’s success. The wisdom inherent in local communities may not be based on the kind of academic, calculated research/science so valued by the university, but community wisdom needs to be respected, accepted as relevant, and brought into discussions and decision making. In addition, allowing local communities to be equal partners with the university increases local people’s critical thinking, leadership, and civic society skills. Though my collaborators at the university probably agreed engagement with communities was important, the paradigm they used to define this and the paradigm I used were generally not the same.

Parenthetically, the roots of our EPA project grew from a more successful collaboration with the university funded, ironically, by Kellogg. In 1999, the university received a large Kellogg Community Partnership grant. The Kellogg initiative was designed to link teaching faculty to local communities. Our partnership brought university faculty and students into the county to work with local high school teachers and students. Together we sampled tributaries in the same watershed where the EPA project would eventually take place. Those sampling results showed exceptionally high levels of E. coli. This provided the baseline data for the EPA award. Thus Kellogg informed our EPA project in both a philosophical and scientific manner. However, as it turned out, in the

EPA project we missed the mark of meaningful engagement that Kellogg was encouraging.

Discussions about this project began in the local community late in 2004 before final agreements were signed between EPA and the Commission. From that beginning until the project ended in February 2010, we held 74 meetings at the local volunteer fire station. In total we held 74 meetings. Often the community had more questions than I was able to give answers to. Often I found myself saying that I'd have to see what F. and M. had to say, only to report back that I hadn't gotten a specific answer yet. Though I was trying to learn about wastewater systems and tributary issues as fast as I could, I was uncomfortable giving answers without some kind of confirmation from F. or M. But the local community was getting tired of meeting, talking, and seeing no systems go in the ground. They had developed a home ranking system based on a number of criteria. This in turn led to a prioritized list of who would be in line to get a wastewater system. From the start the Commission had talked about the importance of letting the local community be equal partners in the project. Though the Commission felt it was critical for them to vote on key actions, they had continually taken their lead from the community and endorsed local recommendations.

Tensions increased as the frustration grew over no action installing systems and continued vague answers to questions. Despite this, the three of us kept moving forward. In early August 2006 we ran a legal advertisement soliciting bids to install the first four home wastewater systems. F. had written the specifications for these. However, as potential installers began calling with questions about the installation parameters, the Commission decided to halt the process until there was greater clarity in the bid specifications. In September, F. and I worked together and wrote new bid design specifications for the installations. A bid committee was formed of homeowners from the watershed; a legal announcement was run in the paper announcing the process. Once bids were received, it was agreed that F. would reviewed all the proposals and make his recommendations to the bid committee to take into account as they made their decisions.

As agreed when the bid deadline came on September 26, copies of all the bids first went to F. He reviewed them and made written recommendations. None of his comments suggested that any of the proposed systems might not be acceptable to EPA or might not follow bid system protocols. This is a critical cog (or maybe the missing cog) in what happens later.

The bid committee gathered, discussed F.'s recommendations, talked with the local county sanitarian, and interviewed the installers who'd submitted a bid. The committee came to a consensus, took a formal vote, and sent their choices to the Commission which was meeting two days later. The committee agreed with some of F.'s recommendations, but not all. In the time between the committee meeting and the Commission meeting, I shared the local recommendations with F.

On October 5, a few hours before the Commission was to meet, M. emailed me to say she had talked with F. and felt some of the proposed installations the committee had chosen did not conform to the bid wording and federal conditions, and therefore the committee was acting illegally.

That night I shared the bid committee's recommendations with the Commission as well as M.'s concerns. Given the strong objections from our research center partners, the Commission decided to hold off approving the committee's recommendations. They felt that I needed to get clarification from Washington about what we were allowed and not allowed to do in the project.

Perhaps a better choice at this moment for me would have been to go back to F. and M. rather than contact DC. It definitely would have been more prudent. Unfortunately by this time it seemed as if most of the tenuous threads of engagement between the community and the university were unraveling too fast.

I felt strongly that if the bid process were illegal and threatened the project, F. (who helped write the bid specifications) should have pointed this out before the legal bid announcement went to the newspaper, and certainly when he sent his recommendations to the bid committee. All of us at the county level assumed that the process and the potential bids by installers were acceptable, legal, and permissible. The after-the-fact threats that the project was about to be jeopardized were like a punch in the solar plexus. I felt it would serve the community and Commission best if, at that point, I got my advice from the federal EPA rather than from our university collaborators. The Commission agreed. I needed specific answers rather than just be-patient counsel. Taking direct action seemed to me what a project director should do. But I had never directed a project like this that involved so many players and organizations, and I was definitely not prepared (perhaps naively so) for the firestorm my actions would initiate.

My email to DC gave some background including the disagreements between the 3 of us (F., M., and me) about the scope and parameters of the project and asked for clarification about what types of systems we could and could not put

in. I carbon copied my email to everyone involved including supervisors. Shortly after my email went out, F. and M. also sent emails to DC. Their emails set down their positions and their technical academic answers to my questions.

Ten days later our federal grants manager in Washington emailed me back saying he felt we had some serious communications issues that need to be addressed as well as other issues about the future of the project.

That night, the local community met and voted that the project should stop the bid process until things were clear about what could and could not be done, and (more importantly) clear about what role the community would play in how decisions were made. Comments from that meeting included:

- *“We are allowed to make decisions as long as we make the decisions they want us to make.”*
- *“We need to get an agreement from F. and M. that after they make their recommendations to us, we get to make the final recommendation to the Commission. If they won’t let the community make the final decision, then we aren’t needed.”*
- *“If we ain’t gonna have a say, there’s no sense in us being here.”*

The next day the Commission met and agreed with the community: Stop the bidding and installation process for a second time.

Both my supervisor at the University’s Extension Department and F. and M.’s supervisor at the research center were aware of the firestorm. F., M., and I had agreed to have a conference phone call to try to iron things out and figure how to move the process and project forward. As we were ending that call, their supervisor joined us and told unequivocally me that I had to call the EPA federal project manager and apologize for my emails and my actions. He was clear that should EPA conclude the University could not manage this program effectively, it would be profoundly embarrassing, and it would be my fault. This was the second tipping point.

Though I did email our federal project manager, I did not apologize for my actions or assume sole blame for the failed process. Instead I asked to meet with him and outlined what F., M., and I were considering as the next steps to get us back on track. The Commission’s relationship with Washington moved forward, and there was no apparent decrease in federal funds to the university.

It's only conjecture on my part, but it seems conceivable that F. and M.'s supervisor had a talk with my supervisor expressing his concerns about my actions and the overriding need for university collaboration and solidarity. I assume he reinforced his message that I was jeopardizing the university's relationship with the federal agency. In any event whatever happened at that level, my relationships with my supervisor and Extension changed.

Ironically the same month the bidding process unraveled, I co-presented at the National Outreach Scholarship Conference with my supervisor. Our topic was "The Struggle for Equal Partnerships between the University and Low Income Communities," and it focused on the project. The year before, the President of the University had held up the project as one of nine in his Annual Research Highlights report. Yet by 2007, I felt as if a line had been drawn, and I was seen as a thorn. Cooperation and support from Extension started to fade. A continual message from my supervisor was, *You've got to get along with F. and M. This project will succeed.* I felt as if my concerns and frustrations were treated as those of a trouble maker and so had little merit.

Information I requested about money the project was paying the university was often met with delays and objections. Though our local Member of Congress came into the watershed twice (once to help take tributary samples and once to help dedicate an installation), my supervisor from the university never came down to see what was happening. Perhaps the most discouraging blow came in 2009. By then F. had left the research center and I had assumed his role. M. had agreed that her role and responsibilities would finish at the end of February 2009. At that point she would submit an analysis of tributary sampling results and discuss how new systems impacted the health of creeks and streams. When the report's due date came and went, I asked my supervisor for advice on how to handle this. No response. In mid-May when there was still no report, the president of the County Commission wrote to M., her supervisor, and mine, expressing concern and saying, the Commission "*finds ourselves in the awkward situation of not having the critical data and analysis we need, as well as having to explain that the university has not completed a job it agreed to fulfill.*" No response. I then wrote to the director of Extension at the university letting him know the situation and asking for his suggestions. No response. It was as if we no longer existed. At our end we just stopped worrying about the report. Eventually the Commission received M.'s report in July, though no one ever responded to the letters or emails.

The project ended in February 2010. 40 homes in the watershed had new wastewater systems. A great deal of activism and research examining wastewater issues in rural, low income communities had been generated at the

local level. In many ways the project had been very successful. Yet, viewed from the lens of the kind of university-community engagement the Kellogg Commission advocated, the project had not succeeded. The community by-in-large had lost faith in the university. The university hadn't benefited from learning that the community had natural strengths which could have complemented and supported the university's outreach mission. Way too much time and energy had been expended dealing with the mistrust and bad feelings that were generated, and this was time that could have been spent on the project itself.

On a more positive note, there were a few faculty from the university as well as from Extension who took an interest in the project. We had shared our research and ideas with them and can hope that some of these percolate through academia. The project has raised a number of important and significant research questions. There is hope that at some point the university or individual faculty might work on these. People and institutions do have the capacity to change, and initiatives like the Kellogg Commission's, can be the impetus for this. Meaningful engagement between universities and communities continues to be a struggle.

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