

COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION: A CASE STUDY OF THE TOWN OF DUNN

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A. PRACTICAL POLITICS AND THE DUNN LAND ETHIC

In 1972 I was asked to run for political office in my Town of Dunn -- a community just south of the capitol city of Madison, Wisconsin. A few weeks earlier I had spoken up at a town board meeting in response to a board member arrogantly telling his audience they should not interfere with board decisions on land development. He had told them, "If you don't like what we're doing, elect someone else next time, but for now you might as well go home." I was there because of research I was doing to discover how land use decisions were made in Dane County, Wisconsin. But during the tirade administered by this Supervisor to the 12 or so rather meek people assembled there, I was converted from an objective observer into an emotional participant -- leading me to give what later was called "a speech on democracy." Someone took down my name and number and three weeks later I was invited to a meeting at her farm house -- a meeting of 50 and more who gathered from across the town. I soon discovered that these citizens were meeting to find a way to come to grips with an unresponsive board and rampant urbanization of the countryside. Housing developments were emerging here and there across our 34.5 square miles; our agriculture was threatened; so were our wetlands, lakes, and streams.

The farm house meeting decided that the only solution was to "throw out the Town Board" by running new candidates for the town offices. That decision resulted in me being elected as one of the two Supervisors on the three-person Town Board in April, 1973. Two years later, they elected me Town Chair, and soon thereafter the town put into effect a two-year moratorium on all land division to give us respite from day-to-day decisions that was taking all our time. We were enmeshed in the steady stream of subdivision requests and plat reviews and, while we knew we had somehow to put these smaller decisions into larger context, we simply could not. The moratorium, however, gave us the pause that allowed us to think things through, figure out where we were heading, and plan a course for the future. Three months into the moratorium, things quieted down and we set about doing a detailed inventory of everything contained within our borders -- natural and unnatural, wild and domestic. We recorded and made maps of bedrock geology, glacial geology, lakes, ponds, springs, streams, wetlands, soils, woodlands, prairies, archaeological sites, agriculture, historical sites, land ownership, sewer districts, and fire districts. We made lists of the creatures with which we shared the land: wetland plants, prairie plants, crop plants, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish, invertebrates. We discovered our the hydrologic cycle worked, with all its seen and unseen components and how we as citizens interacted with it. We discovered the rich heritage of our natural history and social history. We came to know our place. We liked what we found. We also decided to care for it and keep it. We build a base for a land ethic by knowing where we were and what we held in trust.

The scientific and ecological description we produced of our place, and the land ethic that emerged from this and from extended discussions about it was recorded in the Town of Dunn Open Space Preservation Handbook. This provided the knowledge base for ethical political action. This action first took the form, in the late 1970s, of the land stewardship plan -- labelled, in compliance with the Wisconsin Statutes the

Town of Dunn Land Use Plan. This political action was moved from plan to law through translation of the plan into the Town of Dunn Subdivision Ordinance. It was this ordinance that provided the basis for preserving land from being subdivided and also for subdividing land when in accord with the purposes of the plan. It was also moved from plan to law through the adoption of Agricultural Conservancy Zoning -- a legal provision for protecting lands not to be used for residential subdivisions and related uses.

Despite early battles with those who would destroy this land and its life for adding still one more house, or another hundred houses, people committed to the stewardship plan, and to the ecological and social integrity it represents, stayed at the helm and kept the town on course. The success of the Town of Dunn in coming to grips with the problems that were apparent in the arrogant assault of a town official on the citizens gathered in the Dunn Town Hall that evening in 1972 eventually brought it to receive the Renew America Award in January 1995. It was the only one given across the nation for exemplary "growth management."

Publication of the Ethic in Life and Landscape.-- The citizens of Dunn have decided to know their place well and to act on their knowledge of their place for the benefit of the land and its life. A land ethic has been instilled, and we have dedicated our lives to it and its defense. It is published in many written documents, such as those already cited. But it is published best in lives of its citizens and the landscape of the town.

Its publication takes form in the people who dedicate their time and resources to the life of the land by:
serving its people,
serving on town boards and committees,
restoring its prairies and wetlands,
building parks,
celebrating special events,
producing bicycle and canoe guides,
contouring farming their lands,
planting trees,
cleaning up roadsides and streams,
raising funds for achieving greater integrity of land and life.

Its publication takes form in the land which gives visible testimony to the Dunn land ethic in its preserved, restored, and created
prairies,
wetlands,
savannahs,
woodlands,
streams.

The Dunn Land Ethic is published across the town as
contoured farmland,
roadsides replanted to prairie,
a reestablished connection of Esos Marsh with Lake Waubesa, Heritage Park and its ecological restorations, an annual Arbor Day celebration,
non-structural flood controls,
vital and intact ecosystems.

It is published as
vibrant human community that is integrated into the fabric that covers its soils and glaciated terrain.

Among all of the publications in land and life of the Dunn Land Ethic, perhaps none is more dramatic than its citizens' recent decision to add to its only burial ground-- a site unused since the late 1880s. The townspeople have not only been determined truly to live here but also to be buried here in what has become their native place. Land stewardship has become a way of life here, so much so that we affirm it in our ultimate planting in the land we serve as it serves us. Land stewardship has become a way of life.

In Dunn, we have come to know that the integrity of the landscape and the community are worthy of our lives. We have discovered that our environmental and land use problems, like everyone else's, are ethical ones. In developing our ethics, as we have in Dunn, we are drawing upon some deep values of western culture for refreshment and nurture. These include our belief that we do not ultimately own the land, that we should live in harmony with the land and its life, that we should respect and even love our neighbor, that we should celebrate and provide for the fruitfulness of Creation, and that we should not press ourselves or our environment relentlessly. Often suppressed by the exigencies of "the treadmill" or "the rat race" which so characterize our hurried society, these values can be opened to examination if we will create opportunity to do so. Time must be made available. Taking a break from busyness can provide opportunity to to develop the good sense of so living on the land that we do not destroy it and its life. If we can reclaim a respite from the frantic pace we set for ourselves and others, we will gain the time for asking the vital questions about who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going. We can jump off the treadmill and get out of the rat race to rediscover the joy and necessity of nurturing our land and its life, taking care of ourselves, and taking care for our progeny and our neighbors.

In the Town of Dunn, we found a way to bring the peace necessary not only to refresh ourselves, but to refresh our whole town in tradition of keeping the earth and its life; making sure our world maintains its fruitfulness; and making sure we give ourselves and the rest of Creation the time we need for rest and restoration. We took this opportunity and through it opened the window that would show us who we were, where we had been, and where we were heading. We found that what we saw of the impending future did not square with who we were and who we wanted to be. And it was this mismatch that provided incentive to do what had to be done.

There are many ways to present what we did, and I have employed one of these above. Another way is to present this as a sequence of events which is done below. In doing so, I am simplifying a complex and demanding process that may create the illusion that it is a series of simple steps. It is not. Instead of being something simple, and something you can take with "momentary hustle," it is a decision to give such high priority to your place that what you do in and for your place becomes your way of life. Nothing short of that level of commitment appears to work.

Doing what was done in Dunn is not a matter of getting the right people into office, or getting the right data, making the right contacts, or writing the right ethic. It is a matter of being willing to change your life so that it becomes interwoven with the life of the land and the life of the community. And with that emphasis I present what I believe is the sequence we travelled as we came to grips with our own future and the future of the land that sustains us.

B. SEQUENCE OF EVENTS IN DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING THE DUNN LAND ETHIC

The sequence of events that brought the Town of Dunn to achieving and maintaining a stewardship ethic and stewardship plan are as follows:

1. Observing and Evaluating (Problem Recognition)

The very first step was to observe and evaluate what was happening around us. Everywhere we looked we found that when farmers reached retirement age that their land was sold to people who would

subdivide the land and build houses on it. There was no "rhyme nor reason" to it. We called it "helter-skelter development." Natural areas were being threatened, altered, and destroyed. The practice of farming was declining. "Development" meant only residential subdivisions to the neglect of the rich meaning of this word. The likely future was a landscape of houses and shopping malls with abandoned farms and habitats in between that stood in waiting for the time they would become houses and shopping areas too. Life was being transformed from one that had visible connections with creation to one where these connections were broken. People were becoming enmeshed with the products of human activity -- fast travel on expressways, security and protection systems, maintaining lawns as monocultures, immersion in virtual worlds in other galaxies, anticipation of escape vacations. And all of this at the expense of disconnection from the sustaining land and its remarkable life. People were becoming aliens to their own place.

2. Forming an Energetic and Committed Town Board and Constituency

People had to be found who were willing to change their goals in life toward knowing and serving their place with full dedication to maintaining and restoring human community, agriculture, natural systems, and the plants and animals that with their physical environments form the wetlands, woodlands, streams and prairies. Basic to this was forming an energetic and committed constituency to engage in the necessary discussions, raise needed funds, serve on committees and commissions, organize festive and educational events, write brochures, lead field trips, engage children and adults, and work to put the right people into town office. The constituency must be very substantial. In the Town of Dunn in the early years of the effort to build and implement a land ethic, this need was met by generating such interest that approximately 10 people were able and willing to run for town office, 100 were able and willing to do substantial work for the town within 24 hours, and that 1000 were able and willing to do something substantial for the town with a week's notice.

3. Putting Initial Control Measures into Place

Getting into political office can be very disappointing if one expects really to be able to change things. This is due to the fact that the power to do things often resides mainly outside of the government unit within which you are operating. In the Town of Dunn, much of the power was vested in the State of Wisconsin and in Dane County. This "outside" power, for example includes the State Highway Department, the State Department of Natural Resources, the County Board, the County Highway Department, etc. And so it is necessary to do a careful study of who has power to do the things that need to be done.

The Town of Dunn had to discover where it currently had power to control its destiny of the town. Where it had such power, as the Town of Dunn has over its road system, it had to be exercised toward fulfillment of ecological and social integrity. Thus, for awhile, "Road Access Permits" were employed by the town to provide foreknowledge to the town of projects approved by the County that required access off of town roads. We used our power over roads to make it necessary for people first to come to the town before they got a permit from the county for changing a land use. Where the town did not have power, it had to find routes to achieving such power. This required careful selection of a bright lawyer who persistently sought ways for achieving goals, rather than consistently told the town what it could not do. While means of achieving necessary power were being sought, discussion, reason, and persuasion had to be employed diligently.

4. Implementing a Moratorium

A moratorium was declared on all land divisions in the Town for two years. This provided the time needed to think about who we are, what we had been and where we are headed. And the moratorium allowed us to put into place whatever was needed to assure a future with social and ecological integrity. For us in the Town of Dunn, this did not give immediate quiet because it resulted in a whole series of law

suits filed against us during the first few months. These, however, were maneuvers designed to intimidate us. Again, a good lawyer for the town gave us the insight and encouragement we needed to persist in our work. To help us handle legal challenges we built up a fund of \$100,000 by not building roads for one year. This allowed us to stand firm in the legal challenges that were sometimes hurled in at us.

5. Executing a Land and Cultural Inventory

Our inventory was extensive, covering the various ecosystems, biodiversity, agriculture, and human community past and present. We made good use of the expertise available from the university and from the citizens of the town in getting this put together. Some of the maps were made by citizens in a local drafting shop after hours, at no cost to the town. We discovered, as anyone would if they explored their own expertise, that there were many talented people among us that could do the work. Results of the inventory were published in the Town of Dunn Open Space Preservation Handbook in 1979, and an accompanying data book.

6. Adopting the Land Stewardship Plan

Everything we had learned from doing the inventory, and from reasoning with each other in hundreds of meetings (we met weekly or more over for three years and more), was put together into a plan for the town. It was entitled, the Town of Dunn Land Use Plan. While the board has authority to adopt this plan, we chose a referendum instead. This got everyone engaged in the process. We gave advance notice of the upcoming referendum on the plan many months in advance and found that this was ideal for engaging people in discussion, deliberation, and self-education about their town and its future.

7. Codifying the Stewardship into Ordinances

Based upon these documents a Town of Dunn Subdivision Ordinance was developed and adopted, supported by the implementation of a new Agricultural Conservancy land use zoning.

8. Enforcing the Ordinances Consistently and Uniformly

These have been uniformly enforced ever since through their administration by the Town of Dunn Plan Commission and the Town of Dunn Board. Plans and ordinances without enforcement are worthless. And non-uniform or inconsistent enforcement sets bad precedents that will destroy what has been accomplished. Provisions had been made to change the plan through a highly deliberative procedure to address problems and situations not foreseen at its original writing. Problems were addressed not by making exceptions, but by modifying the plan through thoughtful and deliberative work.

9. Nurturing the Stewardship Ethic that is Expressed in the Ordinance

What was codified into ordinances and written into the plan was not enough; it reflected the underlying land ethic but was not that ethic itself. This means that the land ethic must be nurtured continuously. In Dunn this is accomplished through an official newspaper produced by the town, annual festive and educational events, and deliberative development of new policies that further the purposes of the Dunn Land Ethic. Current work to raise property taxes in order to develop a fund for the purchase of development rights is an example.

10. Publishing the Stewardship Ethic in Land and Life

Finally, the real product of the whole process is the life of the people of Dunn and the landscape of Dunn. Unless the Dunn Land Ethic is published in land and life it is not a real ethic, but something merely recorded in books and documents. The measure of the success of this ethic is what one finds in human lives and in the landscape of the town. To the extent this improves or regresses, adjustments may need to be made. The proof of the Dunn Land Ethic is its positive expression in land and life.

C. LESSONS LEARNED WHILE SEEKING TO IMPLEMENT THE DUNN LAND ETHIC

Investigation of the history of the successful stewardship efforts in the Town of Dunn reveals some important principles that have wide applicability. These principles are as follows:

1. Pay attention

Many of the truly significant events and situations may be commonplace, subtle, little-noticed, or assumed by everyone to be under someone's supervision or approval. Moreover, meetings at the Town Hall or gatherings in support of political candidates may easily pass most people by even though such meetings may have momentous importance. And, many important decisions of lasting and widespread significance may be "buried" in insignificant chatter and actions. A Town Board meeting for example might appear to have as its purpose informal chatter about "the price of hogs" or "the big storm," with the decision to approve a major land use change being dispensed with a few short sentences just before the end of the meeting. Most communities fail by simply forgetting to pay attention. Paying attention means being alert at all times to all events and circumstances.

2. Realize that we are "they"

Most people say at some time in their life, "They need to do something about this!" By so doing they confess that they believe that there is someone other than themselves who really are responsible. While this sometimes may be the case, if most often is not. In a democracy, our talk about the "they" -- the people who are expected to act in our behalf -- often is no one else but ourselves. If proper stewardship of land and Town resources are to be accomplished, we must see ourselves as "they." In democratic governments, we are "they." Unless we understand and believe this, the land and the Town's resources will steadily deteriorate. Recognizing that we are "they" means that will be ready to take action whenever we see something that needs doing.

3. Be appropriate and resourceful in your response

If something needs attention, is not sufficient to merely respond. Instead it is necessary to respond in the very best way possible, putting to use every resource that you and your associates can bring together. Several questions need to be asked: What is the situation? What are all the elements and personalities involved? What will happen next, if we respond in a particular way? And what will happen after that? How will it all play out in time? And how should we respond so that the very best outcome is achieved in the long run? If our response is matched to the situation in the best possible way, and if we are careful to put together the right people and other resources in our response, the situations or ideals that present themselves have the best chance of improving the stewardship of our town and region.

4. Empower the citizenry

While one or a few people can do very much, a democracy requires that a large number of people are meaningfully working together to address the challenges and achieve the goals. More than being the requirement of a democracy, this empowerment also assures that what is done will have staying power-- that it will produce fruits that will last. Clearly, empowerment of large numbers of people means that they must be fully knowledgeable about the land, the people, the natural environment, the forces and pressures that work against wholesomeness, the laws and ordinances, and how to create new laws and ordinances. A citizenry thus empowered leaves no vacated position vacant for long, since many are able to fill in for others. There are 4 or 5 we can envision as Town Chairman, 6 to 10 as Supervisor, etc. We are not dependent upon the few for we have made it an important part of our citizenship to empower the many to do the work of the Town.

5. Re-Instate Local Democracy and Re-Establish Community

It is important that we do not use the terms "town meeting," "democracy," and "community" lightly. There really is the possibility of a real town meeting, there is the possibility of real democracy, there is the possibility of real community. Instead of calling things by these names when they are something different, care must be taken to turn these possibilities into realities. Local democracy can be re-instituted with its center piece being regular town meetings in which all citizens have an unhindered voice in discussion. Voting is not sufficient and neither are public hearings. In a democracy, all people must not only hear or be heard, they also must be enabled to engage in discussion and deliberation. This, together with re-establishing the human community -- through meetings, picnics, celebrations, painting bees, and the like -- provides not only the opportunity to discuss and address problems, but also the means for learning about ourselves, the land entrusted to us, and the forces that shape us. It also provides the opportunity for us to take hold of our own responsibilities to govern our own behavior and to be stewards of the land and all it contains. And it provides us the opportunity to celebrate the fruitfulness of the land and our endeavors to maintain its fruitfulness and ours.

6. Find and learn from situations where things are more or less right

Some things we have to develop will need to be totally new in order to deal with our specific situation. But most of what we should and can do already has been done by someone somewhere. And so it is very helpful to seek out examples of where things have worked in other places and at other times and learn from them. The people who have developed and implemented these things can be interviewed, invited over, asked to participate. The ideas, notes, and documents from other successes can be transferred and adapted to our situation. And beyond the learning we gain from such visits and inquiries, we will be encouraged by knowing of the success of others in some aspects of what we hope to accomplish.

7. Follow through to full conclusion

Most good ideas that have good support never get put into place. They usually fail because they have not really been brought to full conclusion. A study of natural and cultural resources for example, although highly desirable, will do very little by itself to bring respect to those resources. Similarly, a land stewardship plan will not achieve its goal if it stops at that. It must be put into the form of law, especially in the form of a Subdivision Ordinance accompanied perhaps by the addition of needed categories such as Agricultural Conservancy to the Zoning Ordinance. But even law is not enough. The laws and ordinances have to be enforced, or they do absolutely no good. And because it is impossible to hire enough people to observe whether laws are being obeyed-- because policemen and constables cost money in proportion to their number, and because this is not the solution in the long run anyway-- every citizen must take responsibility to know the laws and ordinances and to do what they can in their own places and travels across the town to make sure they are being obeyed. A wetland being filled can be reported to the town hall or a bag of garbage along the roadside can be sifted to find addressed envelopes and then returned to its "sender." As it is with plans, laws, and enforcement, so too it is with committees. It is not sufficient to discuss important matters, or keep good minutes; everything must be followed through to its full conclusion, or all the rest is worthless.

8. Practice forgiveness

Every one of us likely will violate some law or accepted practice that we ourselves put into place. We may break the speed limit on a town road, or let too much junk remain in our yards, or burn something in our trash that never should be burned. There will be some who have fought us "tooth and nail" on some land use regulation perhaps, or on getting the town to bend its rules. We will have had good reason to be

upset by such actions, but we also have to recognize these opponents as citizens of our town just as we are-- we must recognize them as potential friends. Hopefully they will in time see the value of caring for the land as we do as we must ever put before the people of the town the lessons-- good and bad-- of land stewardship. But we must also forgive. Those who have done us and the town wrong, must be given repeated opportunity to share as full participants in the work and vision of land and resources properly sustained and caringly supported. All must eventually be enabled to share in the work of caring stewardship of the land.

E. The Dunn Stewardship Ethic

What is the Dunn Stewardship Ethic?

I believe it is this: We should serve and keep the land, its life, and the human community entrusted to our care; We should preserve the capacity of the land, its life, and its people to be fruitful; and, We should provide for ourselves, the land, and its creatures, spans of time that are adequate for their rest and recuperation.

Where is the Dunn Stewardship Ethic published?

In the lives and landscape in the Town of Dunn.

How is the Dunn Stewardship Ethic administered?

When what we find and see that our publications in lives and landscapes are out of accord with the Dunn Stewardship Ethic, appropriate administrative corrections are made to bring these back into accord.

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