

CITIZENS LOOK TO THE FUTURE

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As citizens, we want the best of what tradition offers; yet, we also want the best from change. Since the turn of the century, citizens have been increasingly bombarded by complex issues created by rapid and relentless social, technological, economic and political change. The response by many citizens to such complexity has been to relinquish responsibility for public policy decision making to scientists, technocrats, professionals, politicians — to the experts.

By allowing technological change to go undirected and unchallenged, however, citizens are witnessing the ravages of environmental pollution, the burdens of high health care costs, the ominous spread of nuclear arms, and the growing threat of global unemployment. Faced with such dramatic change, citizens have begun to question the decisions of experts and the direction society appears to be taking. This concern is a major driving force for a movement which is reasserting citizen values and choices in the public policy domain.

The movement has grown in two directions in America. The most visible direction is reflected by the decline of the two major political parties and the dramatic rise over the past fifteen years of special interest groups which demand immediate responses to current concerns. This avenue has led to a fragmentation of the American political process. Less visible, but also growing in importance, is citizen concern for the future implications of today's public policy decisions. A number of organisations have initiated programs to inform citizens about trends and emerging issues and to encourage them to express their opinions about the changing world around them. These programs work to build consensus around critical long-term issues. Further, the citizens in these programs are taking their views to decision makers at the local, state and national level. It is these organisations and their participating citizens that are described and commended in this article.

In the United States, a number of citizen programs have been established to act as conduits for information about future developments in the social, technological, economic and political arenas. Among the most noteworthy of these programs are the Future Agenda, a US Congressional program; the National Issues Forum, a nationwide citizens' program; and the United Way Environmental Scan, a community-oriented service program.

NATIONAL ISSUES FORUM

A nationwide program similar to the Australian Commission for the Future has been established to promote citizens discussion and understanding of public policy issues and to insure alternatives in the social agenda. Concerned over an apparent decline in the quality of America's public life and the gap that seemed to be separating ordinary citizens from policy makers, a group of community and educational organisations in 1981 decided to start the National Issues Forum, a nationwide issues discussion program modelled on America's town meetings. Now in its fourth year, the program has involved over 33,000 people in 140 communities and 41 of the 50 American states. The program gives citizens an opportunity to inform themselves about critical long-term issues, to choose among realistic public policy options and to share their informed minority opinions and consensus views with policy makers.

The National Issues Forum is co-ordinated by the Domestic Policy Association (DPA), which consists of civic and service organisations, libraries, senior centres, institutions of higher education, churches, labour unions, corporations, foundations and *ad hoc* local groups. Although the DPA is sponsored by the Kettering Foundation, the Benton Foundation and the Public Agenda Foundation, the individual DPA organisations raise or provided their own funds and recruit personnel to facilitate local forum programs.

The National Issues Forum involves local citizen discussions of three issues chosen each year by local forum convenors in collaboration with the DPA and the Public Agenda Foundation, a nonpartisan research organisation that prepares briefing materials on each issue. The comprehensive, objective and easily-read 35-40 page issue booklets are designed to help participants begin the discussion from the same starting point. The issues featured in the 1985 forums are health care costs, environmental protection and joblessness. As citizens state their own views and listen to the views of others, they often move from their first opinion (which tends to reflect poor information on the issue) to second or third opinions which, in many cases, tend to be more thoughtful and well-informed judgments. The forums help raise the level of public debate on issues and present citizens with options and ways to think through alternative possibilities. Although program moderators seek agreement or common ground on issues, alternative viewpoints are respected and are conveyed to local, state and national policy makers.

Citizens involved in the National Issues Forums complete two questionnaires, one prior to the forum and the second after the forum. The questionnaires measure the degree of learning by citizens during the process. At the local level, forum organisers assess the completed

questionnaires and the results of the forum discussions in order to brief decision makers. By meeting with local and state officials, forum organisers hope to build more understanding and commitment towards resolution of their long-term concerns.

Follow-up is not limited to the local level. Nationally, the Public Agenda Foundation collects, tabulates and analyses the questionnaires from around the country. The summary findings are presented at the annual national conference. Here, selected National Issues Forum participants and policy experts from in and out of government come together to discuss the issues. An interactive tele-conference is made available to local forum sites around the country to enable other citizens to talk with national policy makers and experts.

Finally, a group of citizens is chosen to bring the results of the forums to the policy makers in the nation's capital. In one week, they meet with senior administration officials, members of Congress, and national organisations concerned with similar issues. Representatives from the local forums are generally well-received, so much so that the impact of the National Issues Forum on public policy is growing.

UNITED WAY ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN PROGRAM

The United Way Environmental Scan program was developed five years ago to assist local non-profit United Way chapters with their fund-raising and community social service decisions. An integral part of the program is the environmental scan committee. The committee consists of approximately 40 business, government and educational professionals whose responsibility in their organisations is to identify and monitor trends and emerging issues in the social, political, economic and technological arenas. At its bi-annual meetings, the committee identifies national and regional trends and emerging issues, and discusses the implications of change for local United Way chapters. The trends along with issue briefs on topics such as the changing workforce and tomorrow's elderly are published for the benefit of United Way chapters, policy makers and business leaders.

Upon receipt of the Environmental Scan document, local chapters are encouraged to use the information for planning purposes. These plans could include the development of new community service programs, the elimination of some existing programs, or the redistribution of funds among social needs that are growing in magnitude. For example, a local United Way chapter may choose to develop a special child care program in response to the growing trends toward dual-income households, single parents, and a US 'baby boomlet'.

The United Way national headquarters strategic planning team is now developing an on-line computer database which permits local

chapters to receive recent information on trends and emerging issues. The database draws its information from a network of volunteers who read local newspapers, magazines and journals and abstract those articles which suggest a trend, or a shift in the direction of an existing trend. Analysis of these abstracts will hopefully provide insight into local and national movements and offer a base of information from which to research and discuss emerging issues.

THE FUTURE AGENDA

The Future Agenda Program, with its beginnings in 1982, evolved from a belief by some members of the US Congress that "the unprecedented and accelerating pace of change constitutes an awesome challenge to representative democracy." Many members of Congress questioned the usefulness of applying old solutions to new and more complex problems. In the face of change, states Senator Albert Gore, Jr., "it is of critical importance that the Congress develop longer time horizons and seek to anticipate problems before they mature into crises. A futures perspective can lead to larger frames of reference in which the blur of events can be viewed as understandable patterns."

With the assistance of the Congressional Clearinghouse on the Future, a legislation service organisation created by members of Congress to help them identify trends and emerging issues in the social, political, economic and technological arenas and to recognise the long-range implications of the decisions they make within that context, a report called *The Future Agenda* was developed. *The Future Agenda* adapted futures analysis to the rigid committee framework that is central to the daily operations of the US Congress. The document is an inventory of issues which each of the 200 subcommittees of the US House of Representatives anticipates arising within the balance of this century.

Following the release of the report, a panel of futurists selected key emerging issues from the 200-page document which they felt could be the focus of congressional attention within the next five years. Their list of seventeen issues was further reduced to six issues by members of Congress acting as an advisory board to the Congressional Clearinghouse on the Future. The final list included health care cost containment and alternative health care programs, tomorrow's elderly, the societal implications of the telecommunications/computer merger, retraining the workforce, trade and investment policy, and the societal implications of developments in the biotechnology field. Questions about these issues were then sent to citizens for their comments and opinions. As might be expected, most citizens had very little knowledge of these emerging issues, but wished to be informed

about new developments and wanted to participate in future discussions concerning the implications of these issues.

FACING UP TO CHOICES

When issues in the public arena become complex, citizens often feel a lack of control over public policy and they become apathetic. However, education and informed discussion appears to give citizens a heightened sense of control. Discussion helps individuals understand the issues and the options open to them. For example, more and more individuals who are concerned about receiving adequate social security payments in the future are buying individual retirement accounts to hedge against potential future economic programs. In the health care arena, knowledge of potential cost containment programs and concern for one's physical condition has created increased attention to exercise and good nutrition programs, as well as to holistic health centres. The need to reduce health care costs and prevent illness has also increased the use of health maintenance organisations and neighbourhood walk-in-clinics.

Given an opportunity to receive and discuss unbiased information about issues, citizens are capable of facing up to the choices that have to be made. In a rapidly changing political, social, economic and technological environment, the choices to be made about the issues are value choices. Such choices are not the sole domain of experts; instead, they are choices to be made by citizens with a future.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Marilyn Gadzuk, *The Future Agenda*, Congressional Clearinghouse on the Future and Congressional Institute for the Future, Washington DC, November 1982.