

Tools: Community Responsibility

"The two reasons that community could become a possible instrument of policy and a potential source of efficiency and innovation are that communities can inspire effort and creativity and they can get by with lower costs for management and oversight." — John Brandl, 1998

Self-interest is a clear and accepted economic concept. Yet, there are frequent examples of people doing things out of a sense of responsibility that may not be in their best economic interest. Can that sense of self-responsibility be developed and nurtured to provide public goods? The local community (churches, civic groups, businesses, interested people, etc.) often provides services that government does not provide directly:

- Food shelves
- Counseling
- Temporary assistance
- Volunteer firefighters
- Volunteer teaching assistants
- Roadside pick-up of trash
- Shared neighborhood responsibility for a public park, parkway, or garden.

"We had better recognize from the start," asserted Schumpeter (1947), "that exclusive reliance on a purely altruistic sense of duty is as unrealistic as would a wholesale denial of its possibilities." Local government in the past was not as involved in the community life as it is today. Problems were either dealt with by the community, or they were not dealt with at all. Today we've reached a point where fiscal stress on local governments is so great, we must ask the tough questions: What are the appropriate functions we should undertake, and which functions should we return to the community?

A good example of this is youth sports activities. A young person may participate in a public sports team through his/her school or park recreation center, but there are also privately funded "club" or "traveling" team options. The president of St. Cloud State University has said that further budget cuts may require the discontinuation of the collegiate football team. Brandl (1998) made the argument that the community may provide the public service less expensively than the government, saving society valuable resources.

What are the appropriate functions local government should undertake, and which functions should be returned to the community?



Phrases like "load-shedding" and "do it yourself" are part of community responsibility. Community rehabilitation of juvenile offenders is an alternative to government jails. Do we have to have organized sports at a park, or could the children organize themselves into teams?

Public volunteering may become more popular. The ushers at the Guthrie Theater are all volunteers, for instance. If nonprofits use volunteers for up to 10 percent or more of their workforce, should local governments do so as well? Today, there are volunteer teacher's aides in the schools, volunteer fire fighters in cities, and volunteers in the sheriffs' offices in the counties. Can this be expanded?

Nonprofits have proliferated in Minnesota as part of a community response to those things that either government isn't doing, doesn't do well or needs help doing. Can nonprofits become major players in supplanting government activities? A resource like a public senior center may need to become a community responsibility.

Technology has increased the opportunities for community involvement. For example, citizen drivers can call 911 to report roadside emergencies. Or, a new smart phone application allows citizens to take a picture of a pothole and transmit the image and precise location to the appropriate local officials.

To illustrate the *problem to redesign* methodology for this section, an example of new soccer fields follows:

Step 1. Clearly define the problem

Need for additional grass fields for recreation.

Step 2. State the desired measurable outcome

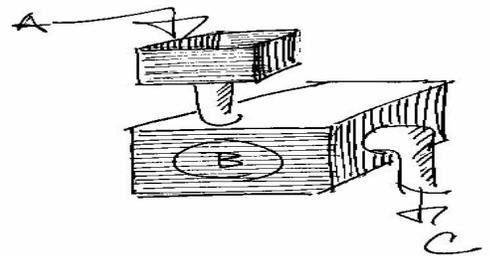
Create four more soccer fields in the North Mankato area.

Step 3. Investigate why traditional approaches aren't working

City buys land and develops new fields for soccer by itself; the city has to maintain the parks and someone has to schedule the use of the parks, all at significant costs.

Step 4. Identify alternative theories or assumptions that address the problem

Youth sports are a community responsibility, not a government one.



Step 5. Innovate and redesign

The North Mankato Soccer Association helped fund the construction of four new soccer fields on Mankato Area Public School property working with the City of North Mankato. A local engineering firm provided the grading plan at cost.

Real examples of community responsibility include:

- [Minneapolis Downtown Improvement District](#): A nonprofit organization whose mission is to preserve and beautify the Minneapolis downtown area; they chiefly achieve this by removing graffiti, picking up litter and assisting pedestrians.
- [Chisago County Unwanted Medications Disposal Program](#): Provides Chisago County residents a place to safely dispose of unwanted medications.
- [North Mankato Soccer Fields](#): An instance in which the community stepped in to finance and build soccer fields.
- [Albert Lea and Freeborn County Humane Society Animal Services](#): A nonprofit organization that provides the animal control services in Freeborn County.
- [White Bear Arts Education](#): Provides art education and enrichment in the White Bear Lake community.
- [Volunteering in Red Wing](#): Due to budget constraints, the City of Red Wing now has a volunteer coordinator who recruits volunteers to execute activities formerly done by city employees.
- [Friends of the Park in Redwood Falls](#): An independent organization that operates under the umbrella of Redwood Area Communities Foundation, Inc. The board's mission is to have a source of funds through tax-deductible private donations, grants and fundraisers that can be used to maintain and improve Alexander Ramsey Park.
- [Defined Contribution Pension Plans](#): These plans shift the investment decisions from the government to the individual.

Obviously, the quality of community efforts can vary across the state. Family incomes, geography, and local traditions may hinder the ability of some communities to respond like others. And some communities may not have the necessary leadership. Furthermore, taxpayers may resent paying their "fair share" for government and then being asked to support some things that government traditionally provided.



Further information is available at The Humphrey School of Public Affairs [Local Government Innovations Website](#).

