



PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

## Strategic Public Policy

# Development: A New Transformation

by **Mike Letcher**

The transformation of governance over the past 30 years has been remarkable. Geometric growth of technology, improved management practices, new approaches to civic engagement, strategic planning, and other changes have forged an excellent foundation for public management in the 21st century.

One key component missing in this foundation is a more strategic, at the local government level, thoughtful approach to public-policy development, according to author Brandon Bowman. "In the American political system, public-policy formulation is a fractured, complicated, and multileveled process characterized by competition among groups seeking to influence future policy, disagreements among different levels of government as to how a policy initiative should be crafted, and debates and compromises between politicians seeking to satisfy many divergent and sometimes contradictory political objectives," writes Bowman in his article, "Problems With the American Public Policy Process."

"The result of the policy formation process is often a policy that is considerably different than the one envisioned by whoever first defined the problem as something needing government intervention," he concludes.

The short- and long-range implications of poorly formulated public policy can have significant and sometimes catastrophic consequence for communities. Since public-policy formulation is one of the most important functions of a governing body, more strategic and systematic approaches need to be considered. The opening of the curtain on a new approach to public-policy formulation provides a great opportunity to correct issues stemming from current practices.

**FIGURE 1:** Strategic Policy Development System.



Source: Mike Letcher

## NEED FOR A SYSTEM

A review of the problems behind the curtain of public-policy formulation is essential for effective governance. This will not be an easy task, as Bowman points out. “Contrary to the popular belief of public-policy formulation as a clearly defined and straightforward process, government policy making is often rife with fragmentation, lack of coordination, and inconsistencies.”

Strategic policy development may offer a way to open the curtain and add more consistency and improved results for public-policy formulation. What does strategic policy development look like? Figure 1 provides an example.

The issue or need for the policy is the initial step in the process. This is followed by a determination of the policy model or models that best describe the issue. The determination of the policy model is critical for the governing body and staff to clearly determine what is driving the need for this policy.

Theoretically, the goal of policy development is to reach a critical mass of policy models that are identified and can be applied to the issue. The more models that can be applied should result in a balanced, efficient, and result-oriented policy.

Once the policy is developed, metrics are identified for the governing body and staff to measure its effectiveness. Initially, the policy should be reviewed annually and then at least once every five years to determine if it is still achieving its intended results.

**FIGURE 2:** Policy Models.



Source: Mike Letcher

Figure 2 shows policy models that can be a key guidepost to strategic policy development. The policy models and subsequent definitions are not meant to be all-inclusive. The concepts or models can be adapted to meet the unique needs of the governing body and staff.

Components of the strategic policy development system can be changed and policy models altered to fit your particular needs. In my experience working with governing bodies for more than 30 years, these models represent the key components or drivers that create the push for public-policy formulation.

**Compass approach.** Policy development is based on community values, approved plan, or strategic approach.

**Best-practice approach.** Policy is based on best-practice principles.

**Opportunity approach.** Policy development is based on significant community and/or organizational benefit.

**Politically based approach.** Policy is based on narrow intent from special-interest groups or constituents.

**Core business/staff-recommended approach.** Policy is based on the requirement to run government's core business functions and is recommended by staff to improve services, internal operations, and policies.

In terms of policy models, more is better. Try out models and see how they work. Groundwork has to be done for strategic policy development to work. A number of critical issues also have to be considered:

- Time required, the more the better. Thinking ahead and developing an annual work plan is important to provide the time to fully evaluate important policies that the governing board will consider.

- Staff capacities to effectively implement the policy. Are there enough worker bees to get the job done? This needs to be fully evaluated by the governing board and staff before time is spent developing the policy.
- Committee referral before consideration. This is a no-brainer. It always helps to have a committee recommendation.
- Communication of need and outcomes. Unfortunately, the clear and concise communication of the need for the policy is often overlooked. Get the sound bites determined before the policy-formulation process starts.

## **NO EASY ANSWERS**

An approach and model for strategic policy development is needed. The approach described in this article is based on experience and what I have seen work and not work behind the curtain of policy formulation. Managers know there are no easy answers or solutions to policy development.

But like all journeys, it begins with one step and the compass, map, or GPS to get you to the destination. Strategic policy development is that first step managers need to take.

## **ENDNOTE**

<sup>1</sup> Bowman, Brandon, 2009, *Problems with the American Public Policy Process* ©BridgeGroup, LLC. <http://voices.yahoo.com/problems-american-public-policy-3879954.html>.