

Utah's grass-roots effort a model Ariz. can follow

by **Casey Newton** - Feb. 7, 2010 12:00 AM
The Arizona Republic

When Arizonans look at their elected leaders, they see people with priorities far different from their own.

Residents say they care deeply about the state's natural beauty, but budget cuts by lawmakers will force two-thirds of state parks to close.

Residents want a diverse economy, yet the state continues to rely heavily on one industry, housing, that is battered and faces an uncertain future.

And while residents place a high value on education, our education system ranks 46th nationally, according to the non-profit group that publishes *Education Weekly*.

In a recent Gallup poll in which Arizonans outlined those priorities, only 10 percent of residents said elected officials represent their interests well.

For Arizona to become the state residents want, elected leaders need to align their priorities with those of the public. A well-organized, widely supported grass-roots effort could provide clear direction to leaders.

Already, the state's economic crisis has led civic groups to advocate government reform. High-profile efforts include the O'Connor House Project, launched by former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, and the Center for the Future of Arizona, led by former Arizona State University President Lattie Coor.

The groups are soliciting ideas, crafting questionnaires for candidates and pushing the Legislature to change the structure of government to better align the priorities of politicians with the priorities of the people they represent.

The efforts are just getting under way, and little has been accomplished so far. But reform approaches elsewhere suggest that to succeed, Arizona must galvanize public involvement like it has seldom, if ever, done before.

One successful model to follow is just across Arizona's northern border. Utah's challenges were similar.

Faced with high population growth in the 1990s, Utah civic leaders became concerned about how to accommodate so many new residents without disrupting the state's high quality of life.

Traditionally, elected officials would have taken the lead to manage growth. But residents of the libertarian-leaning state resisted that kind of top-down control.

So reformers in Utah instead started from the bottom up, building a grass-roots movement that led to the voluntary adoption of measures that observers say improved the state's economy and helped it weather the current recession.

Compare that approach to Arizona's, where reform organizers have so far limited public involvement to surveys and a few public forums.

To align the visions of elected leaders with the people they serve, Arizona may have to become more like Utah.

The Utah model

Although managing growth, not government reform, was the Utah initiative's goal, the process did lead to change in how elected leaders work. In fact, the approach has become a model for problem-solving throughout the U.S. and even in some foreign countries.

Envision Utah was created in 1997, and together with state government, it developed tools to help communities plan. It educated the public on how to accommodate growth through higher-density zoning, the expanded use of mass transit and other strategies.

That education led residents to support proposals they might have once rejected.

The key to reform efforts that work, organizers said, is a bottom-up approach that makes citizens champions of the process. The core of Envision Utah's model is to ask residents to reflect on their values and hopes for the future and then translate their thinking into action through interactive workshops. In its early days, Envision Utah would hold 50 public meetings for each step of the process.

Large-scale public participation is a catalyst for action, participants say. Tom Jensen, an architect from Logan, Utah, says political candidates in his region now compete with one another over who better supports the vision developed by residents for the Cache Valley.

"This has a greater chance to be implemented because it's a grass-roots vision," said Jensen, who also has an office in Tempe. "It gives political leaders cover."

One example: Grass-roots support led elected officials in nine different communities around the Great Salt Lake to adopt a plan limiting development on the lakeshore.

While focused on growth issues, Envision Utah also has used its model of public engagement to create disaster-preparedness plans for the state and address issues related to higher education.

"We think that this is a process that can be used to address a number of issues in a community," said Alan Matheson, a Tempe native and attorney who now serves as Envision Utah's executive director.

Jeff Edwards, president and CEO of the Economic Development Corporation of Utah, said the state's reputation for collaboration has helped officials lure businesses.

"Envision Utah has been a great tool for us in communicating to companies that this is a community that works together," Edwards said. "We kind of take it for granted. They say, 'Trust us, this is not the way it happens in other states.' "

While no group can take sole credit for a state's economy, lately Utah has had plenty for Arizonans to envy. The state's unemployment rate is 6.7 percent, compared with 9.1 percent in Arizona.

The key to success, Matheson said, is not only involving the public from the beginning but also keeping it involved until the end. Persistence, he said, also is critical.

"We've all seen examples of good plans that sit on the shelf," Matheson said. "But nothing happens in the public realm without public support. The way you get public support is by giving people ownership in that plan."

Arizona's effort

In Arizona, would-be reformers have made some efforts to involve the public.

The Arizona We Want, an initiative of the Center for the Future of Arizona, aims to take the results of the October Gallup poll and translate Arizonans' goals into concrete steps to achieve them. The extensive poll of 3,606 Arizonans was designed to produce "actionable insights" into residents' thinking. Using questions tested in dozens of other communities, Gallup found Arizonans are highly engaged in civic life compared with residents in other states.

Despite that engagement, polls regularly find dissatisfaction with elected leaders.

"The endgame is still the endgame: to get citizens and leaders working on the same things, to start pulling together on the things that we need to do," said Pat Beaty, director of the initiative and a senior fellow at the Center for the Future of Arizona, the group led by former ASU President Coor.

Beaty said the institute needs to move beyond abstract goals to engage citizens about issues affecting their communities.

"You can talk about the Arizona we want," Beaty said. "But it has to become embedded in the Flagstaff we want, the Yuma we want, the school we want."

Coor has toured the state for the past three months, meeting with elected officials and civic leaders and soliciting their ideas and support. And the center plans to send questionnaires to candidates for elected office so citizens can see where they stand on those topics.

O'Connor House Project participants have taken their ideas for reform straight to the Legislature. A spinoff group, Government for Arizona's 2nd Century, is working with lawmakers to support bills

that will ask voters to create a lieutenant governor's position, eliminate term limits and end taxpayer funding of candidates.

To date, the group's efforts at public involvement have been limited to an invitation-only town-hall meeting for business and civic leaders. The approach has raised questions about how the group will develop the support necessary to succeed.

The bills cleared the Senate Judiciary Committee and are scheduled to be heard in the Rules Committee this week.

Michael Bidwill, president of the Arizona Cardinals and chairman of the government-reform effort, said the time is ripe for change. "We have a unique chance to improve the way our government works," he said. "When you look at any public-opinion poll, a lot of people are looking for government to work better."

Organizers acknowledge reform in Arizona has had a spotty history. Many efforts lose steam before any real change is accomplished. Still, the state's current crisis has brought a rare opportunity for real change.

"I see this groundswell starting to build," said Sue Clark-Johnson, executive director of the Morrison Institute of Public Policy at Arizona State University and the former chairman and CEO of *The Arizona Republic*. "In the decades I've lived here, I have seldom seen such a compassion and a caring and a concern for the future of this state."

But concern alone won't be enough to reform state government.

"You can't just do a vision and walk away," said Brenda Scheer, dean of the University of Utah's College of Architecture and Planning and an Envision Utah board member. "People have to own it, and they have to be champions of it."