

# Over My Dead Body!

A Workbook for Community Involvement

Lance Decker  
Lindworth Press

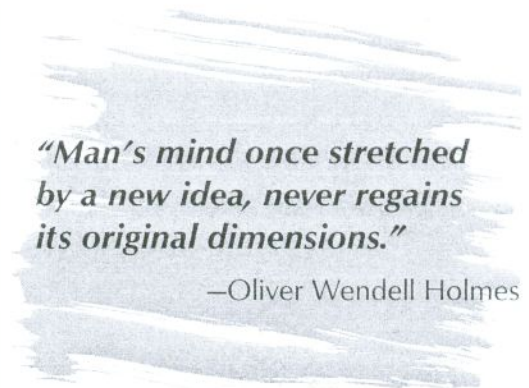


## Foreword

A friend of mine once said, "It's really simple. When it comes to public policy, two factors determine how people feel...personal power and money. And if you believe that money is just a way of keeping score, then it's all about power." I pondered those words for a long time. That's a pretty strong indictment of democracy and the shallow, self-serving attitudes of our constituencies, public managers, elected officials and policy makers. We've all seen situations where it appeared an individual or group rejected the common good for personal gain. Is it that we can't put personal profit aside long enough to consider the collective benefit, or is it the fear of losing that little bit of control and power we believe we have that drives the conflict?

Helping people make good public decisions and then helping them make those decisions work is the subject of this book. The title came from a public hearing involving a wastewater treatment and recycling plant proposed in the center of a suburban community. As the city staff member finished his presentation requesting council approval, a woman in the back of the room shouted, "Over my dead body!" In those few words she established the tone of a debate that was to last eighteen months.

It isn't easy being a public official. Policy makers are responsible for decisions that, by their very nature, are controversial. They address critical public needs and wants. They use democratic principals as the litmus test. They must take the broadest, most inclusive perspective possible. This process takes time and doesn't come without



***"Man's mind once stretched  
by a new idea, never regains  
its original dimensions."***

—Oliver Wendell Holmes

*"I once thought that our work enhanced the power of the public... but, in fact, the bureaucrat is the one that benefits most from community involvement. The bureaucrat benefits from the depth and breadth of intellectual capital that citizens represent. He benefits from the clarity of organization and direction that the agency must provide before it can effectively engage stakeholders. The bureaucrat benefits from the eventual quality of the decision and the wealth of support that community-based planning generates. The authority citizens accrue by being involved in public decisions pales when compared to the power generated by public agencies willing to invest in the human capital of its citizens."*

—Lance Decker

criticism. When the decision is finally made, the official has had to balance not only the public good, but also the ephemeral concepts of fairness and justice.

This book was written to give public managers responsible for community involvement the tools to successfully do their jobs. The techniques outlined assume that decisions made in a democratic society are subject to disclosure, discussion and debate in a public forum, through a public process. Let all people hear, know and judge. It addresses the typical situations we find ourselves facing as we work through public issues. There will be instances where special communities and unique cultures require adaptation of the tools and techniques highlighted here, but, for the most part, these techniques have been effective in redirecting anger and encouraging issue resolution.

Throughout this book I've included stories, vignettes, checklists and pithy quotes to help the reader put into context the conceptual text. Because much of this material comes from 20 years of personal experience, I took the liberty of writing in the first person. Likewise, you occasionally will read a section that sounds like an instruction manual. That's because *it is* an instruction manual. Feel free to apply these techniques liberally, but with caution.

If you don't have time to read the rest of this book, remember the following seven items:

- Give **accurate, timely and appropriate information**; don't hide things pertinent to a public decision.
- Give people the **opportunity to do the right thing** without being forced to do so.
- Give everyone **a voice in the decisions** that affect them, and listen to what they say.
- Give everyone **respect**.
- Provide **choices**.
- **Don't manipulate** people or the community involvement process.
- No matter how heated the discussion gets...**preserve self-esteem**.

---

*A conversation heard during a heated public meeting:*

*Agency representative:* "How many times do we have to say 'no' before you understand that we mean 'no'?"

*Community leader:* "As many times as it takes to get you to say 'yes' and make it mean 'yes!'"

---

*"All government—indeed, every human benefit and enjoyment, every virtue and every prudent act—is founded on compromise and barter."*

—Edmund Burke