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Some Problems of Maryland Towns As Seen by Their Mayors

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National Aeronautics and
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SOME PROBLEMS OF MARYLAND TOWNS
AS SEEN BY THEIR MAYORS

H. J. Peake

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To be submitted to
Nation's Cities

GODDARD SPACE FLIGHT CENTER
Greenbelt, Md.

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Introduction

In April 1974, in response to a request from the City of Baltimore, the Goddard Space Flight Center (GSFC) and the City started an experiment in technology transfer. The objective was to determine if a senior space technologist could, by working with City officials, help identify alternative technological solutions to city problems or conditions. The experiment, known as the Baltimore Applications Project (BAP), has led to the identification of a great variety of problems, and an even greater variety of possible solutions to choose from(1). Choices of solutions, of course, are the City's prerogative, although the technologist's advice has been requested in selection of alternatives, and in implementation as well.

The BAP is judged to be remarkably successful--this judgment is shared by the project participants, and is confirmed by the findings of a panel of five independent experts who performed a detailed evaluation of the project(2). Analysis of the project design reveals a unique combination of features; e.g., sensing user "pull" instead of exerting technology "push," a Federally-employed technologist whose only assignment was to direct the project, a sizable R&D installation (GSFC) close at hand for technical support, etc. With the BAP project accomplishments in hand, then, the question arises: Is the BAP philosophy and methodology appropriate to beneficial uses of technology in settings other than the City of Baltimore;

specif., does the Baltimore experience point the way to provide effective technological assistance to smaller towns and cities?

As a first step in attempting to answer the replication question, an interview was obtained with the mayor of each of six Maryland towns. The purpose of the interview was to describe briefly the BAP experience and, importantly, to get the mayor's reaction and thoughts about possible appropriate arrangements, if any, with his community. During the conversations on these and other topics, something rather unexpected took place. Each mayor, with welcome frankness, offered his version of some of his area's main problems. In retrospect, it seems worthwhile to record here this unanticipated insight. It is felt that mayoral candor has produced data worthy of consideration in pondering questions on technology transfer appropriate to urban centers.

Problems

Each mayor willingly and candidly discussed his town's problems as he viewed them. As a result, these unexpectedly frank revelations produced a list of problems and conditions of concern. Problem identification was not an objective of the discussions with the mayors; however, the conversation naturally centered on problems. Thus considerable data emerged which, while certainly not complete or exhaustive, appears to illuminate the nature of the problems currently facing Maryland municipalities. In the hope that some contribution, however small, can be made to problem solution, the following discussion is offered.

One town's list of top-priority problems may not resemble another's. But examination reveals that, beyond priority differences, the problems seem to differ mostly in degree, not in kind--to differ in scale, not in essence. And so the problems cited by the six Maryland mayors exhibit considerable repetition. These repeated problems fall into three categories:

a. Administrative--Many difficult and frustrating situations occur in this area. In addition to occasional difficulties with uncooperative, inflexible town councils, mayors are facing an imposing array of tough problems pertaining to administration and management. For example, there are problems arising out of relationships between town and county. Where the same service is provided by both jurisdictions, the townspeople may feel that they are unfairly taxed to support the county operation. As a case in point, a town that maintains its own police force, out of town taxes, feels unfairly burdened to pay county taxes to maintain county police.

Personnel management problems are receiving increasing attention. Faced with tight budget ceilings and escalating costs, officials are striving for increased productivity by town employees. Improvement is being sought by initiating personnel practices which include position descriptions, performance evaluation, technical training, supervisory training, and management team-building.

Each mayor has identified, as an operating practice, a sort of unofficial "deputy" or executive officer to oversee the entire town operation. The deputy is a senior appointed official or department head--e.g., city

clerk, head of public works, etc. This potentially awkward but necessary situation presents some problems, including severe demands on the deputy's time. The perceived solution is to have a city manager, but, as the mayors point out, this is a budget-impacting, politically sensitive matter.

b. Socio-Economic--Perhaps the most burdensome long-range difficulties lie in this category. Here are found the conditions and problems which directly affect people and their way of life. It is, therefore, not surprising if elected officials seem particularly concerned about socio-economic matters.

An interesting feature of problems in this area is the increasing average age of town residents. Although no recent data are available, it is felt that the average age of the townspeople is increasing due at least to two forces: (1) youngsters leave to seek improved job opportunities in large urban centers; (2) retired people move in to take advantage of the lower cost of living.

Among the imposing socio-economic problems are those pertaining to the downtown area--

Downtown renewal

Downtown traffic/transportation

Historical preservation

Center-city shopping mall construction

Economic viability of small shops/stores.

Evidencing downtown difficulties are the shopping centers burgeoning on the outskirts of town.

Other problems include maintaining a favorable tax base and rate, and the related problems of attracting and holding appropriate industrial and business establishments. Integral to many of these considerations is a heavy reliance on Federal funding support for renewal projects, waste disposal projects, law enforcement improvements, etc. This reliance on Federal support engenders the administrative burdens of obtaining and managing grants--grantsmanship is seen as a necessary function.

c. Technological--As in large cities, town operations involve a wide variety of technology-based functions--public works, transportation, traffic control, health services, police and fire protection, education, etc. In addition, some towns own and operate one or more utilities, such as water supply, waste disposal, and electrical power, which involve technology. Thus, somewhat unexpectedly, the mayors did not enumerate any substantial list of problems with technological dimensions. They did, however, generally feel that their towns can beneficially apply technological advances; decisions on same would of course rest mainly with key officials in the operating departments.

Of the technology-oriented problems, the ones mentioned most are waste disposal and utilization. There appears to be particular interest in the prospects for solid waste utilization.

One other technology-type item deserves mention, i.e. the rise of computers as adjuncts to operations. The computer is being used to improve situations in accounting, budgeting, and control of operations. But, true to tradition, the computer brings with it some unwelcome problems, including job dislocations and new skills requirements.

Findings and Conclusions

The six mayors we visited were gracious hosts and candid talkers, willing, even eager, to reveal and discuss the problems besetting them. They were well informed, not just on matters pertaining to their own towns, but indeed on problems and conditions in other towns, the state, and the nation. Each mayor evidenced dedication to duty, sense of responsibility, and long hours work, far beyond the meager salary rewards. In other words, they differ drastically from the popular stereotype of the town mayor!

The insights provided by the mayors lead to one main conclusion:

--From town to town, problems differ in degree, not in kind.

Differences in degree are reflections of the regional culture and history. Adding in the opinions of the constituency and the influence of local leaders produces problem prioritizations that markedly differ from one town to another.

In short, each community has its own character or "personality," manifestations of which are problems and priorities. Recognition of town individuality is vital to any consideration of efficacious assistance by an external source.

References

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- (1) Thomas S. Golden, "The Process for Technology Transfer in Baltimore," NASA Technical Memorandum 78112, Goddard Space Flight Center, Greenbelt, MD, April 1978.
- (2) "The Baltimore Applications Project: A New Look at Technology Transfer," report of a panel (Ruth M. Davis, Chairman) of the National Academy of Public Administration, prepared for Goddard Space Flight Center, March 1977.

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