

Consensus Decision Making: The Foundation of the West Eugene Collaborative

August 16, 2007

As the name “Collaborative” implies, the WEC is founded on the hope and expectation that members of the Eugene community will be able to work together to build common ground, beyond the win-lose dynamics of the past. To this end, at its May meeting, the Collaborative adopted a set of “Operating Agreements” that described consensus. As hoped, the Operating Agreements have been refined as the Collaborative has evolved. The current draft contains the following language:

Consensus and Consensus Decision Making

- *Decisions on recommendations will be made by consensus of all named West Eugene Collaborative members.*
- *Consensus means the willingness to go along with the decision either in active support of it or in not opposing it.*
- *The commitment to work for consensus means that members will:*
 - *participate in the give and take of the process in a way that seeks to understand the interests of all,*
 - *actively generate proposals thought to be workable for all, and,*
 - *work together to reach consensus.*

The language below reflects further refinement of the original “Operating Agreements.” The Collaborative has made all of its decisions so far by consensus and future meeting summaries and the website will highlight consensus decisions more explicitly.

Consensus decisions made during the meetings of the Collaborative will be highlighted in the meeting summary and posted with the narrative and date of the decision, on the website: <http://www.orconsensus.pdx.edu/WestEugeneForum.php> Collaborative members may then consult with their necessary constituencies. Any Collaborative member wishing to question a consensus decision may do so via email at least two weeks prior to the next meeting of the Collaborative. In questioning a decision, members have an obligation to propose alternative language that they believe will be acceptable to all.

Questions were raised between the June and August meetings about whether voting will ever take place within the Collaborative and whether one or more Collaborative members can “block” a recommendation with which everyone else is in accord.

It is fundamental to consensus decision making that voting not take place although a quick “thumbs up or down” is sometimes used in the course of the discussions during which consensus is forged. As the definition above suggests, a consensus process differs from a popularity contest among competing proposals. Rather it involves open and creative work by the group as a whole to craft a common solution that best resolves the problem at hand while respecting and incorporating the needs and concerns (“interests”) of all participants. In this way rather than one person blocking a group decision s/he is asked to explain how the proposal falls short of resolving the problem or meeting the need. The group then works to improve the proposal to overcome the objection. If this effort is unsuccessful, the recommendation of most members is put forward accompanied by an explanation written by those in dissent of the reasons for their dissent and their alternative.

In the many circumstances in which the Osprey Group has helped groups build solid consensus we have found the results are always appreciated and generally implemented. When consensus is not achieved, decision making bodies are grateful for the careful articulation of the perspectives which remained at odds.

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