

My Toughest Challenge...The Clearwater Roundabout Charrette

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This shows the Clearwater Beach Entryway Roundabout and surrounding area (Photo by Ken Sides)

I faced my toughest audience in my four year history last night. About 350 people, many anti-government, mostly older folks, sprinkled with quite a number of people who came to help fine tune the Clearwater roundabout, all mixed together with many emotions.

Many or most of the folks came out of fear of the change that has occurred and fearing what they do not fully understand. This is quite different than when people come to a meeting as visionaries and leaders of change. In this case the product was on the ground. It sits quietly humming with movement of cars, joggers, people climbing on the fountain, outside my window.

Reports are in that in off-peak seasons the roundabout attracts and moves almost double the number of people to the beach as the former ugly, dysfunctional signalized intersections. It also supported peak season capacity nearly 50% above projected capability. More dramatic, on average days travel times are significant reduced (from one hour down to 20 minutes during peak days).

Meanwhile the roundabout remains a place of confusion and change for many people. It is, at the same time a mover of people, one of the most beautiful gateways into any place in our nation. A charmer from

first site. Lots and lots of problems, from fountains not working, to people getting free car washes on windy days, to more than 300 minor crashes in its opening seven months to myriads of confusion on what lane to be in to do what. It appears that no one, or perhaps only one person has been injured...far safer than previous years under conventional intersection designs. There is a rumor, circulated by one of the local media, that a pedestrian has been killed. But the police and most everyone laugh about this. The worst injury that is known is a bicyclist hitting a bollard, with the corresponding fall and injury. Hence, you can see that the sponsored charrette to fine tune the roundabout has the potential to bring out strong willed opponents and proponents for change.

Many of the people who came had a lot of baggage. Some to disrupt government, others out of dislike for current leadership. The first couple to arrive to recognize me as the leader, sounded off how and why they wanted to radically change this product. After we spoke, they said, "we are the most sensible people who will be here tonight". They were close to right.

We scheduled and ran the event as an opening night charrette. I was attempting to use the many methods developed and perfected for bringing a consensus among visionary people to this scene of distrust and unrest. I wanted to see if we could get a blend of fearful and sensible folks to mix together, to act civil enough to reach a consensus on not tearing down, bypassing on otherwise destroying the youngest and most beautiful intersection in the nation.

The town had just recently rejected a partnership to kick-start its downtown ala West Palm Beach style. More apathy than good sense kept decent citizens from coming to cast a vote for their town's resurrection for change.

And finally, one week ago, the city manager, the proponent for this roundabout and chief architect for reinventing the downtown, resigned with a vote of no confidence.

The evidence that this would be my toughest of all assignments to date were circulating outside the ballroom we were in. Classic stuff. A former city traffic engineer was sitting near the door, spewing vinegar and venom on how his old signalized system was one of the best in the state. His dour mood was hard to avoid. At a main entry point a citizen was passing out literature to do a bypass of the roundabout...not an issue on the table for tonight.

The local commissioner who had called for this charrette before any change was to occur had announced to staff that he wanted me to let everyone speak hearing room style and to let people sit around tables in groups with the people they wanted to sit with. Both of these techniques build anger, produce shouting, and strengthen factions. I politely explained to him that I was hired to produce consensus...and I had to use my tools, not his...but I would find a way to let everyone who wanted to talk. He accepted my concept.

A lot was at stake. This roundabout is a symbol for the town's willingness to embrace change, work together to solve problems, and embrace the future. It was and is also a way to say that place can be created and celebrated despite a conservative population that moved here largely to live a low cost life. On a broader scale it is a test of whether any major intersection in America can be reinvented to be pedestrian and people friendly.

As I saw it, it was to be a mob moderately controlled to create civil action to preserve and provide light modification of the \$11-13 million dollar investment. But to change mob passion to civil action, I knew, would be

hard. To do this required a willingness for the mob to listen, share and reach a common consensus on how to proceed. A distrustful audience faced me...it was clear that the vocal majority of these people were out to "kill", or at least maim.

I had asked the city to market, market, market this event in the hopes that enough good citizens would come out to make the event a success.

I waited out the last of my ten minutes before startup, walking among the audience, watching the long line of people in the hall waiting to get in, and watching the literature of the anti-folks...others with hate buttons...being passed out.

"My mouth went dry for the first time in four years as I waited out the last of the ten minutes before startup. Sensing the chance for a sensational night all of the press and TV cameras were in place. I searched desperately for water as Mashid, the public works director started her introduction of me.

I stepped up to the podium. What would I say first?"

With an accelerated, but peaceful heart rate, I launched. I had a leveler mike, and two standby hand held mikes that I could tap into at any time. The acoustics in the room were perfect. I looked for a friendly face or two that I could fall back on if I had to. I looked for people who were there who were genuinely there to help. I looked for people that could relate to my plight. The emotions and faces I was seeking were too hidden...but I knew they had to be there.

I explained without faltering that I was an outsider...innocent of the design, pace and fervor that went into building this new gateway...a hired facilitator, good at what I do throughout the nation ... helping people face their most significant change as friends.

"It is my mission tonight", I said, to "help you reach consensus on modifying your new gateway by working together, peacefully...to leave this room tonight as good friends...to help with the healing process...and to give your city clear, crisp guidance on what problems exist.

I went on...."But to do this you need to know that this is my toughest assignment I have faced since I started this process four years and 800 towns ago...and I will draw on all of my training, wisdom and knowledge to do this...but I need your help.

"I cannot do this myself...you must help me through this process. I will help you if you are ready to be helped...and to do this I will use a number of techniques. First we will talk about what is working, what you like and do not want to toss out...only by knowing this can we then focus on those things that are broken".

"We will use several activities to get us into the topic. I want to know what your ultimate dream is for your neighborhoods and town...what will Clearwater Beach be in 20 years...what do you want it to be? By knowing this, then we know how to modify this gateway and intersection...write on the index cards what you most want in 20 years. Some of you will read these to everyone here...and we will collect and make use of all of the rest."

The TV cameras poised...they knew they would get a mix of blood and emotion.

Hands went to the cards in a light shuffling sound...so far, no outbursts of anger. I had avoided the worst scenario and gotten most everyone into the process. The therapy of healing had begun. "Busy hands are happy hands", I said to myself

I continued to speak, giving assurances that this process was my best hope...and as they wrote I explained a bit about the next steps we would take, assured everyone that the process would give us a common vocabulary, a basis for identifying the problems and give everyone a chance to talk. In the back of my mind, I wondered how and if this was possible. I had assured the commissioner that everyone could talk...his idea, among 300 angry people, was a potential disaster.

Looking around I saw that many had finished writing their cards. I looked for a semi-friendly face to start with...the last person I wanted to open was a "baggage laden" person of fear and hate. I chose a woman near the front row. I knew from experience that people sitting toward the front were often the most thoughtful. The woman spoke eloquently of beauty and modifying what we had...of her dreams of a restful, happy place of the future. Bingo! She had listened...she addressed the future, not the past. The TV cameras mobbed her.

Another twenty of so folks read their cards...many were hopeful and helpful, some were confused, other were full of fear and destruction. But here was the key...I was watching my audience closely as the cards were being read. In just five minutes I knew the demeanor and challenge of my audience. I knew by their body language how many truly wanted to help, or to be helped...I knew how many wanted blood, and how

many were ready to go one way or the other. My percentages were not good...but I had the chemistry I needed. I had pleaded to the city to market, market this event...unless I had a core of caring people among my mob this event was doomed. I could see now, the city had come through.

One of the cards, which two days later I carry in my pocket as a reminder of the mix, confusion and complexity of thinking reads,

"I vision a safe and good looking gateway - minus the roundabout - make the drive on the beach very simple for the visitor and resident alike"

My next activity, always a success...using Post-it notes to allow people to express their values for their area, using one word adjectives...typically "safe, prosperous, friendly, fun, family focused..." did not produce as good of a response. The activity is intended to show people that they already hold a consensus on things that matter the most to them. But this activity, although it worked for those most interested, was not pulling everyone in. Although most people joined the activity, it was clear that another 30-40%, mostly back of the room folks...sat arms folded...this was too radical. I had to move on.

We got through it...As people completed their work on the wall of words I continued talking through the process. I needed something more radical to hold this audience together.

So I purposefully stepped on some sensitive ground for my client, the city, as I attempted to build a bit more trust in the room.

I stated that as I traveled the nation I found that many people did not trust their government...that they felt powerless, that they were not being heard on things that mattered to them the most. I saw some arms unfold. I explained that these emotions were natural and common...and that the process America is using to make many local decisions is not good, and that what we would do tonight had to prove that there is a better way for governments to act, to behave. More arms unfolded. I gingerly pointed out that what we were doing tonight was a test to see if this community was ready to try a new way of facing change. I saw curiosity among almost all of the faces.

I then announced that I would give a brief presentation to help create a common language of change...to identify the parts of the old and new gateway...to give us common ground for helpful, hopeful discussion.

The lights went out...I presented...my easiest task of the night. Along with images of the gateway, some charmers, others full of fearful identified problems. Toward the end I had a section on the process of change. I knew I had a few ringers in my images. I spoke of Cotati...a town ready to break apart over their fear of change. I showed images of the charrette...making sure that some of the things we had just done were there, and others of activities that would continue in Clearwater for the next five days. Then I told the story of how Cotati used a process that did not work. "Their city manager was fired largely over the desire to build a roundabout", I said. Many in the audience cheered. They conducted a recall election for two of their council members, I added. More cheers. And then I added..."and the citizens were not proud...and, indeed, more frightened than ever". They began listening. I then talked about how we had been brought in to help with the healing of the town..."first doing a training course...gaining the towns confidence...then being asked to come back and do a full charrette, like we are doing this week." I now sensed that many of the audience were ready to be civil.

The lights came on. The easy part was over.

I then asked for people to let us know what was most good about the gateway, and what needed to be kept. I made it clear that we just needed bullet items that we could list on the charts and that they would vote for these.

Some in the audience had listened. Many had not. Their passions were too strong to be held back. We were able to extract a number of positives, but many immediately wanted to launch into speeches. I continued to repeat the instructions, hopeful that I could find the faces that were listening. I struck 50/50. Finally I concluded that the process was working...half were short speeches...half were helpful comments.

I switched gears..."Now", I said, "Let me know what you do not like about the gateway and roundabout...what is not working...state these as problems, not solutions..." I knew a few productive faces to go to...and then, strategically called upon angry faces one at a time...it was important to get a balance of objective folks and off the wall people. In the end it worked. A lot of change was coming. People were more relaxed. And, I think, mostly because they saw that the process was working. As much as people came to sound off, not many wanted a true riot.

As we went to the next stage, people casting their 7 votes for their most important issues on the sheets, I relaxed. TV cameras mobbed the people. One of the stations came to me and conducted an interview...I interviewer stated, "I have never seen such a large group of angry people work so well together...what is your secret?"

I told her that my secret is that I cared about the people and the outcome. I told her that I was more than a happy camper tonight because I had taken on my toughest audience ever and found that the process of listening works in even the toughest situation. I shared with her that I wanted to prove to these people and to Clearwater that a government that listens succeeds. And I told her that this very tough and critical issue could only be addressed if everyone continued to listen and respond to one another.

We went to the work tables. Fifteen table rounds were ready. I asked everyone to pick a table where they didn't know anybody...that we wanted the talent, ideas and concerns to be evenly spread. Some listened...and six good tables quickly formed. Some didn't listen and formed small factions...wrote their ideas, and left.

The body language around the tables that followed the rules was quite good. I brought the city commissioner over to one of the tables and showed him why I felt the process was working.

When the work was completed we conducted table interviews with people gathering around the tables...at least 60% of the audience had left by now...many satisfied, some...I will not know until Monday night...feeling that they had not contributed. But when the table presenters spoke it was clear that a near consensus for change was evolving...that our designers had much to work with.

Then, finally, I gathered the remaining audience, now down to 30% of the starting group to come and sit and share with us any remaining concerns. About a dozen spoke...the words the body language for everyone in the room was relaxed and productive. I was vindicated by one woman...who came to me in anger earlier saying that I had purposefully not picked her earlier to speak...by apologizing to her now and asking her to say what was important to her...she spoke with venom and old baggage, turning herself off from the people in the room...and I said to myself, "Dan you are a marvelous reader of character". After she spoke her words we were great friends.

I went home and rejoiced with my team, Sue Newberry, Michael Wallwork and Barry Crown. Michael and Barry had not slept for two days, due to air flights from England and Australia, but the adrenalin of the night kept us awake long enough for a relaxed dinner.

Yes, Last night's closing went quite well. At least an hour of therapy followed Barry and my presentations to about 250 people. The audience was mixed. Some of these folks who did their cathartic downloading to us, one patient person after another, had not listened to Barry explain the details of the changes. Some are befuddled on how little changes can bring so much solution.... but on faith they accept the concept. Still others see with clarity this complexity and understand how everything fits together.

There must be a quotient of receptivity based on level of anger and fear as to how much new information filters into a brain. It's probably like the Rector Scale...for each measure of increase, from 5 to 6 the impact is a reduction in listening of 10 times.

Although most folks were just fine, happy even, a few of the people in the room had an anger or fear quotient of 7-8.

Still others in the room, it was clear, carry their anger from meeting to meeting, issue to issue...forever. These are sad people populating our planet that many towns and cities carry as damaged baggage. These people are like a broken car on a long train (town/city)...holding back the train as it is hauled across the countryside...one day possibly derailing the train. Unfortunately, the fear of derailment keeps the train (town/city) from being a great place.

I think there is a need for a town therapist. A person who dedicates their livelihood to identifying and treating angry citizens (broken train cars) in a special (remedial?) citizen training course. I am convinced that the same energy that goes into negativity, if harnessed, leads to a very positive new citizenship.

I especially remember one Tallahassee citizen who was so fearful of change that his actions caused many in the city and elected posts to avoid contact. City commissioners dreaded his name and presence. We worked with him a bit and in the end he became the strongest proponent of livable communities in the town. A wonderful transformation.

Some people, however, are beyond help until they clear up their own personal life script. A good

interventionist can tell the difference between the two. We had both types in the audience last night.

Venting helps heal not only people, but issues and towns. Venting in this closing to the Clearwater Roundabout Charrette...not needed nor normal with a visioning charrette...was good...healthful and essential to achieve a new, better slate for change. It provides a sense of closure and the ability to move forward. The night cleared the air for most people.

In the end we achieved a good, if not strong, consensus to enact immediate suggestions (striping, signing and other operational controls, many already underway). Short term solutions also won out (geometrics, new placement of crosswalks, new corner radii, some traffic calming, a reduction of criss-crossing movements, bringing conflict points into lower speed locations, new landscaping, opening sight lines by cutting the fountain height by two full tiers (20 inches), and a new stakeholder task force to oversee these and longer term changes.

Clearwater staff and officials were pleased to delighted. The new city manager (interim) and assistant city manager, and city commission expressed pleasure with the results. The city manager, a former army colonel, came up to me and congratulated me and said that no one else could have done it. That made my heart go pity patter. My suggestion to the city commission (earlier in the day) and then at night to the community is to appoint an 8-10 member citizen/stakeholder task force to oversee the immediate, short term and long term solutions. The suggestion was well received by both sides (commission and stakeholders).

Perhaps the most fun time of the charrette for Sue Newberry and me was our work in the war room -- where we assembled the many citizen and stakeholder drawings, charts and ideas, compressed them into a usable form, expanded them into a matrix and began to assimilate them into solutions, the Power Point presentation and the written report.

It was here that Barry Crown and Michael Wallwork, products of two different continents, each 20 year veterans designing roundabouts in complex settings, at first appeared to be in conflict on several key non-negotiable issues.

I have watched Michael mature over the years. Barry was an unknown. What unfolded were hours and hours of pleasant chatter, banter, checking out details in the field, applying turning templates, drawing, calculating...but mostly discussion, laughter, wrinkled

brows, even more crazed expressions and finally happy faces. The interactions between these two strongly English and Aussie accents, their weird words of expression...their cunning use of their languages, engineering backgrounds, observations...their wit and wisdom... could be the subject of a great book or movie. This is not an exaggeration.

In the end both Michael and Barry learned much from each other. What they came up with was a positive, happy, workable solution to the most complex, beautiful, powerful roundabout in our nation. But the joy of being in that room listening to two grown men achieve added learning and insight, often joking with one another, testing, being tested, smiling with awareness and recognition, each confident with his own abilities, each listening in order to learn and adapt, was priceless. You would have loved to be there... church mouse...listening in. I was there, and it was golden.

I reserved my opinion of Barry Crown until I came to know him better. He is a winner in every category. A simple, apparently nonjudgmental, inquiring man with white crew cut hair and elegant insight. Barry is a keen observer of people, drivers and things...he sees the bigger picture. He is open and capable of understanding and making simple and solvable what is originally complex...and a real teacher. I think he too, learned a lot from this event. And possibly he came to understand the role of public process in a country gone amuck with too little spine, vision, focused value, leadership, and way, way too much listening to fear evoked NIMBYism.

In the end this roundabout, an innocent byproduct of a complex, overly controlled, poorly communicated, rushed and poorly understood birthing, comes out stronger, prouder and more stately than any original polished design could have produced.

It is my hope and belief that the City of Clearwater now understands that this earlier appearing ordinary engineering task is rich in its complexity. More so, that they now understand that the great majority who drive it daily with ease are mixed together with people who are discovering it for the first time, and with those others who enter with white knuckles after having shunned it for months out of fear of change.

I believe they have also come to know that there are complex issues and needs...blending up to 6000 pedestrians on a peak spring break day with up to 60,000 motorists, many pulsing into this relatively little place when TV programs end, or a storm rolls in, closing the beach, some of them intoxicated, some with a car full of friends, some loaded with testosterone...that tiny ripples in such a little

place are all far more than any other style of intersection can handle.

I also believe that Clearwater now understands, perhaps for the first time, not to tamper with conceptual or modified expert driven design...to not cut and paste, choosing those elements that appear most politically correct, or accept alterations from a landscape architect, architect, or engineering firm that had no prior knowledge of building even a simple roundabout (each of whom were too proud, too naive or too arrogant to search, go back or ask) or undertake a fountain of great complexity without more knowledge or study.

In the end, what makes a highly complex roundabout or intersection of any sort work is a very close and patient detailing of many things that fit together. One tiny change makes for a big, almost cataclysmic difference. Clearwater now understands this relationship, this symbiosis better.

If Clearwater wanted a simple retreat to its past...which many of its beach citizens who came in a frantic fury to rave really wanted...it can't have it.

What is being faced by Clearwater is its future. Growth is a certainty. Clearwater Beach traffic had gotten way out of hand. Life for the walking public was uncomfortable at best. Away from the beach there was no public space, no personality, no character. Life at the beach had grown dysfunctional.

The roundabout became and is the lightning rod of change. The Clearwater Beach entryway and roundabout is the most beautiful lightning rod in America. With minor changes the refinement of this rod will soon stand strong and be identified by many as an American icon and classic of a town facing and embracing its future. With giant optimism, I believe this charrette, unique in its tools and application, will help even the most fearful and angry to realize that they, as the roundabout, must change.

For More Information

Clearwater's Beach Entry Roundabout, University of Florida Engineering Dept.
(<http://t2.ce.ufl.edu/Clearwater/page1.htm>)

Dan Burden, *Building Communities With Transportation*, Walkable Communities (www.walkable.org), 2001.