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Boardman Lake Trail

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Abstract

Today in the United States, a significant portion of energy use is devoted to transportation needs. To address sustainable energy use in transportation, Team Wicked Awesome formed in the class LIB 322: “Wicked Problems in Sustainability” at Grand Valley State University in the winter of 2015. Looking to wicked problem solving methods, we examined Traverse City’s need for alternative options for transportation (other than single occupant vehicles). As an alternative mode of transportation, we looked into a number of ways to promote bicycle ridership and came to discover there was a tentative plan to complete a portion of the Traverse Area Recreation and Transportation Trail (T.A.R.T) that would give an entire side of the Boardman Lake more access to downtown and other neighborhoods via bicycle. We discovered that there was a lack of communication between local cycle groups, other community stakeholders and city officials in addressing the completion of the Boardman Lake Trail. We will hold a summit in order to open a dialogue with the community members and other stakeholders to discuss the state of the trail by integrating stakeholders and experts in a discussion panel. As part of the Wicked Problems model of problem solving we hope to bridge gaps that currently exist between these interested parties. We do not intend to create a new effort, but instead we will increase community involvement in the current effort and encourage city officials to place higher priority on the project. This summit will provide the public with information that will educate them not only on the prospects of the trail's completion, but what obstacles exist, and what the community at large can do to help complete the trail. We hope this event will encourage citizens of the community to engage in collaborative effort and to take ownership and responsibility for the future of their city.

Key words: Sustainable, Energy, Transportation, Wicked, City Government, Bicycle, Traverse City, Trails, Recreation, Community

Introduction

What exactly is a wicked problem? Every wicked problem is unique; wicked problems are difficult to identify and maybe impossible to define. This difficulty exists since they are interrelated with other problems; boundaries where one problem ends and another begins are fuzzy at best. Wicked problems are always changing, and as soon as they are identified and treated in one way, they may have already morphed into something else. Any wicked problem has multiple ways of perceiving and defining it, some of which will appear conflicting or contradictory. All of these characteristics of wicked problems are embedded within wide social contexts rather than strictly professional or technical contexts (Brown, 2010). Human nature and behavior is complex, nuanced and often contradictory. Since so many different stakeholders are involved in wicked problems, these characteristics are transferred (CogNexus, n.d.).

The area of wicked problems we are engaging is centered on energy, and further focused on transportation. According to a Report to Congress from the U.S. Dept. of Transportation, 29% of U.S. carbon emissions are from transportation. This is the second largest contributor to CO₂ emissions, after the electric power industry at 34%. Furthermore, 58% of these transportation emissions come from light duty vehicles (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2010). Engineers and entrepreneurs like Elon Musk are pursuing high-tech, high industry approaches to this wicked problem, but a transition away from fossil fuels requires more than one solution (Musk, 2006).

If citizens continue to defer to experts and corporations to facilitate change, this transition is unlikely to be successful. Citizens must take an active role in the efforts

themselves, creating a demand for change (DeYoung, 2013). Electric cars, without a shift to renewable electricity generation, will only shift the site of emissions further to electric power generation rather than transportation. Though there is hope that an increase in use of renewable energy is underway, the process is slow, difficult and costly. If the process of shifting away from fossil fuels to electric cars and renewable energy occurred without any reduction in energy consumption, it would take a tremendous time and effort to reach our current level of energy production through renewable energy only. A substantial amount of fossil fuels would be used in this time and process, exacerbating climate change and global geopolitical tensions over these valued resources. It is clear that a reduction in consumption of electricity and fuel is necessary.

American society also suffers from wicked problems of obesity and chronic illness, as well as social isolation and alienation. We do not design our built environments to be accommodating to alternative modes of transportation, like walking, cycling, and public transportation (Srinivasan, O'Fallon, & Dearth, 2003). As wicked problems involve a variety of actors with different viewpoints, lifestyles and priorities which are bound to conflict and disagree, addressing multiple problems simultaneously through a single course of action gives the opportunity to encourage participation and action through a wide array of incentives. This excites people based on their personal interests, beliefs and convictions.

Action Plan

Before coming to the idea of the "State of the Trail Summit," we actively debated several cycling related projects. Team Wicked Awesome considered a bike share program, incentivized bicycling at the community college,

and creating and distributing a map of safe cycling routes through the city, but eventually we decided that helping to finish the west side of the Boardman Lake Trail fit best with our team mission and values, and would have the greatest impact on our local community. Further, as we soon learned, the trail project has been stalled for nearly ten years.

We adapted Ingrid Stefanovic's ideas in *To Build or Not to Build a Road* to help decide the most efficient and effective way to tackle the issue. The article helped us realize that a collaborative and combined effort with established stakeholder groups would be significantly more effective than going it alone (Stefanovic, 2012). This led to our decision to work with a local cycling nonprofit, Traverse Area Recreation and Transportation Trails Inc. (TART trails).

Team Wicked Awesome began to investigate the reasons for the delay. We sought to connect with stakeholders and truly listen to their nuanced views on the current state of the trail project. Brown's ideas of transdisciplinary inquiry, an inclusion of many types of knowledge, ideas, and expertise, helped us see a more complete vision of the Boardman Lake Trail project than any single stakeholder group (Brown, 2010). This new understanding of the issue led to a major discovery. Although several groups were working toward completion of the trail, we found there was little cross-communication between groups and each had a slightly different perception of the reasons for the project stalling. These groups are reminiscent of Norton's (2005) concept of Knowledge Towers. "Towering increases miscommunication and creates blockage in the flow of important and relevant information, creating 'blind spots'" (pp.33-34). Our group hoped to build connections between the Towers, disseminating knowledge, acting as a boundary

organization.

This was a problem Team Wicked Awesome could ameliorate. Our first course of action was to launch a social media campaign. The purpose for this is twofold. First, it created a unified platform or cause. Second, it provides a convenient outlet for community members to receive relevant information about the trail project and add their voice to the community discussion. We also distributed flyers throughout the city and discussed the trail project with community members at local cycling events.

Next, we sought to address the lack of cross-communication between stakeholders. The answer was elegantly simple. Thompson and Whyte suggest to "gather a group of twenty people that includes as many professions and walks of life as possible, find a room where everyone can meet, and make the meetings as hospitable as possible" (Thompson & Whyte, 2011). We would host a community dialogue event about the trail project, inviting all the disconnected stakeholders. Thus, the Summit for the State of the Trail was born. The summit will take place after the completion of this project analysis paper and will include presentations by the major players in the Boardman Lake Trail project and community discussion. TART trails will discuss the planning and development aspects of the project. Tim Brick, owner of a local cycling shop, will discuss the trail's history and the impact on the local economy. Jean Derenzy from the Traverse City Planning Department will discuss funding and logistics. Team Wicked Awesome will present on behalf of Garfield Township as no representative is able to attend. There is some complication as the trail crosses governmental boundaries and thus more than one governmental entity needs to be involved. The city owns the easements around the lake

despite the location of some outside of the city limits.

The most effective promotion of the summit has been networking and word-of-mouth, but we have also printed color posters, contacted news outlets, and utilized social media. As the event looms on the horizon, there are three tasks that still need to be completed. First, we need to solidify the format and agenda for the summit. Second, it would be helpful to find ways to increase the event's publicity and attendance. Third, we need to clarify what information Garfield Township would like us to present on their behalf.

At the summit, Team Wicked Awesome will mainly serve as facilitators of discussion. We hope to spread awareness about the state of the Boardman Lake Trail project, open lines of communication and come to a consensus with stakeholders for forward progress after the summit. Though we realize it is ultimately the community's decision, it is our desire to see the formation of a Boardman Lake Trail coalition. This coalition would make it their responsibility to work together toward the expedited completion of the Boardman Lake Trail.

Process

We started by researching our community needs pertaining to sustainable energy as it can be applied to transportation. More specifically, we wanted to look at bicycle riding as a means of transportation rather than as a strictly recreational activity. We reached out to local organizations and city government officials in order to determine what we would be able to do to reach our team goals and connect with the community.

Our networking and outreach efforts were most effective when we held face-to-face meetings. We found that the connection and

communication with vested stakeholders was more authentic and produced much better results when they were able to put faces with names and they were able to see our enthusiasm for the project. As part of vetting our project work, our LIB 322 class hosted a dialogue event in order to obtain feedback from stakeholders before completing our efforts. Tim Brick came to the dialogue event after we spent over an hour discussing the trail in his office. Those that we contacted over the phone or email were not present. As a result of these experiences, we often had to redirect our plan of action to include meetings with individuals rather than rely on phone or email communications.

Our goals focused on furthering the development of commuter cycling in the community by improving safety, raising awareness and boosting ridership. As the Grand Traverse region grows, we, as members of the community, have a vested interest in *how* it grows. In order to help support a healthy community, we found that advocacy for bike and foot trails was a perfect way to combine our goals with the community need.

"Individuals must choose to be active, but the way a community develops its built environment can ease or impede the desire to be active."
(HEALTH COMMUNITY: What You Should Know About Trail Building, 2009)

During our attempts to create a project that would actually produce some beneficial forward progress, we looked into what bicycle riding would do for the economy, the health and wellbeing of the community as well as what sorts of individual benefits one might see if a lifestyle change were to include bicycle riding to work or as a form of transportation rather than strictly as a form of recreation. What we found was astounding. According to Gary Gardner of the Worldwatch Institute, not only

does bicycle riding help boost the physical and economic wellness of an individual, the data show that bicycle riding and bicycle friendly communities and cities benefit from less air, noise and light pollution, and lower crime rates (Gardener, 1998).

As we began to work with community stakeholders we were able to determine where gaps in communication existed between interested parties involved in the completion of the Boardman Lake Trail, and our summit will be a platform to help bridge these gaps. The summit will bring the project into the community, not impose it upon the community.

The process of making this project into a viable results-based proposition has involved some redirection, and re-imagining of what we thought we needed to do, coming back to our initial desire to fill a void and connect to community. Flexibility has been key in this process, as our meetings and collaborations enabled us to see this issue from a variety of perspectives. Although we have yet to come across any real opposition, we found that working with local organizations, city, county, and township-level governments has proven to be very complicated given that each has their own perspective and agenda.

Results

After reflecting on our process, (especially after the initial stakeholder presentation or dialogue event on April 8th) we are better prepared for our upcoming summit event. We received valuable feedback from the attendees, classmates, and our instructor, Kate Fairman. Before the stakeholder presentation, all community members we contacted seemed supportive of the plan and encouraged by our enthusiasm. Most people that we contacted were responsive and willing to speak with us.

Fewer stakeholders attended this initial event than expected; ten were invited but only three were present. Being too focused on the content and quality of our team's presentation could have led to oversight of the fundamental characteristics of our process: networking and effective communication with the community's stakeholders. Most of our progress has been achieved through face-to-face interaction with community members. Despite e-mail invitations and RSVPs, most invitees did not attend. Many attendees of the other presentations, however, lent their voice to contributing to the constructive review that we were hoping for.

We received several suggestions from the initial stakeholder presentation on how we could help raise funds for the trail. While all of these ideas were valid and full of potential, our group unanimously decided that we shouldn't extend ourselves to a fundraising project when our main goal for this project was to create an informative discussion panel and promote communication between groups interested in the completion of the Boardman Lake Trail.

Adjustments

The lack of stakeholder attendance prompted Team Wicked Awesome to increase promotion efforts of the State of the Trail Summit. Instead of relying on social media as the main source of publicity, we have arranged for more posters to be printed for further distribution. As the summit approaches, we are continuing our communication with presenters and other stakeholders, verifying their attendance and participation. Because the people we have met in person have been the most productive, helpful contacts, we will attempt to meet face-to-face with stakeholders whenever possible to ensure better attendance at the summit. In our list of invitees, we also made sure to invite key community stakeholders, such as the Traverse City city commissioners and business owners along the trail, like Oryana

food cooperative.

Next Steps

Talking points should be outlined and sent to all presenters, as well as more questions to ask the panelists if the audience doesn't contribute to conversation. Further promotion of the event is necessary as our goal of creating awareness, support of the project and communication between stakeholders can only be accomplished with community participation. Small details in organizing the event will make it a more enjoyable experience for those attending such as proper lighting, quality sound, and comfortable seating. We hope to offer a nice selection of small snacks (including BLTs for Boardman Lake Trail) and beverages, and we are working towards acquiring these through donations from local businesses.

Team Wicked Awesome must also find an effective, clear way to present Garfield Township's position on the matter, as no one from the governmental offices will be able to attend the summit. We must also urge the panelists and community to capitalize on the momentum of the summit. We would like to form a board, committee or coalition to carry the project forward.

Future Considerations

When looking to the future, there are a few things we had not considered that we will need to address. First off, we have yet to encounter any opposition to the completion of the Boardman Lake Trail, but we have not spoken to all stakeholders. We expect that at some point in time we will need to compile resource material with data that show the benefits of building a foot/non-motorized vehicle path. Other projects are competing for city funding, such as the relocation of a railroad "Y", and the construction of a new road, but may not have as much public support as the Boardman Lake Trail. Brownfield

Redevelopment money, which is the largest single source of funding for the project, can be allocated to one of these other projects if the public does not push for the completion of the trail, thus receiving the city council votes needed to acquire this source of funding. There may be projects proposed in the future that are considered higher priority than the trail completion.

Another consideration that needs to be made is our exit strategy. We will be ending the semester at GVSU before the Traverse City city council meeting that will address budget issues. Team Wicked Awesome is dedicated to this project and the completion of the Boardman Lake Trail and will not simply let it go dormant once the semester ends. That being said, we can only do so much. Once we have raised community awareness and support we must make a call to action in order to show city commissioners the community interest in this project. Once this has been accomplished, we will be able to hand the project off to the powers that be who will be able to move the project forward. This project cannot be completed without city commissioner votes, so our goal must be to apply enough pressure on the city commissioners to approve the budget that will include the Boardman Lake Trail investment.

Our exit strategy must include a number of steps. We first must have a successful event with the summit. The next step will be to create a call to action where we will ask the public to email the city commissioners, the mayor, the county officials and the township in order to show public interest and support for the completion of the Boardman Lake Trail. We learned from one of the city commissioners that one hundred emails would certainly gain the commissioners attention. Once we have confirmation that one hundred emails have been sent, we will feel confident that the city commissioners will vote to include the project in the budget for 2016. Once this happens, the city government and other invested organizations will handle the logistics of

actually building the trail.

Finally, there will be a block party to re-brand the 8th Street corridor as the North Boardman Lake District on May 16, 2015. Many of our stakeholders are very invested in this movement and we feel that supporting this event and having a presence may be the final push we need in order to ensure the goal number of emails is sent. We hope to be able to exit this project gracefully after May 16th, 2015, having achieved forward momentum and bridging stakeholder collaboration regarding the completion of the Boardman River Trail.

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