

The “Collaborative Process” for Access Issues

- Do we need more group hugs, and will they solve anything?
- Or will motorheads be having espresso with the enemy? –

By Del Albright

Collaboration (the collaborative process) is getting more and more popular with government agencies stuck with tough political decisions involving public lands. Rather than unnecessarily ending up in court, or wading through countless repetitive hours of NEPA meetings, the collaborative process seeks to find cooperation where competition has previously existed. We should be fully prepared when our chance comes to participate in the collaborative process. But here are some things to consider carefully before you invest your time.

These efforts go by many names, depending on the agency and the area – focus groups, collaborative committees/groups, community groups, citizen’s committees, etc. It boils down to bringing all interested parties to the table to solve a problem before it becomes a big problem.

First off, I have to admit that investing 10 years of my time in one National Forest’s “collaborative process,” and watching a partner of mine commit 10 or more years in a different Forest, has made me a bit cynical. However, we need to be there, be at the table, with smiles and hopes, and be part of this process. And yes we might win some ground. I just caution to not put too much faith (or hope) in a process that cannot solve all the issues.

The basic premise is that all sides must be willing to work together and compromise. So is collaboration just one big group hug? To answer that, let’s start by examining the basic definition of collaboration. One description means simply to work together; the other means to cooperate with an enemy invader. Ouch. But by definition, the collaborative process brings all sides of an issue to a common table to find equitable solutions steeped in compromise. Now that’s a mouthful. There’s a lot to this.

To me, collaboration is a formula that looks like this: **Trust + Faith + Respect = Solutions**

Trust = confidence in the honesty and integrity of those involved.

Faith = belief that those involved will carry through and stick to their word.

Respect = to treat others with dutiful regard, and to treat the process with authenticity.

My experience has shown that this works just fine for solving the easy stuff and making plans and shaking hands when the controversy scale is relatively low. So yes, I hang in there and keep trying. I have just learned to not fall apart and break open the tequila bottle when collaboration finally breaks up and resorts to good old NEPA (and/or court).

When you can solve a problem such as developing a travel management map for a large chunk of land by using the collaborative process, you are likely to get a better solution that has fewer court challenges later on. Heck, you might even build some new relationships out of this process that

help other projects down the road -- yea, I'm talking about motorheads having an espresso with radical protectionists. (smile).

If you can find a group with which to collaborate that embodies the trust, faith and respect formula, you are likely to get a committed solution – one that lasts, makes sense, and avoids a lot of wasted time (and meetings) later on. On the other hand, you may have to be tenacious. In my 10 year example mentioned earlier, the woman who was leading this charge was fighting for her kids to be able to ride their mini-dirt bikes in the Forest adjacent to her home in the mountains. During the collaborative process, her kids out-grew the bikes, grew up, and went on to join the working world. Like I said earlier, you may have to engage this process with the understanding that it might take a while and solve only the easy stuff.

On the other hand, there are some things we can do (or shoot for) to make collaboration work. Try to get the formula in place. Have ground rules and open meeting agreements where folks put their cards on the table. Use a facilitator to help orchestrate a better and more productive meeting. Ensure that everyone affected by the outcomes are at the table. Keep the meeting real – authentic – and transparent. Hide nothing; talk about everything. Agree to disagree; and commit to the process. Then follow through! Abide by the group's collaboration.

BRC has a tool called “Collaboration Checkboxes.”

Brian Hawthorne, BRC Public Lands Director, contends: “A well-conceived collaborative process should include a “check” for each of these key points below. If any are missing, we still advise considering participating, **but with caution.**”

Here are the BRC Collaboration Checkboxes:

1. All stakeholders at the table in proper representation.

Every stakeholder group who has an interest in the planning process should be participating.

2. Professional facilitator.

A formal process should hire the services of a professional facilitator, such as those selected from the roster of the National Environmental Conflict Resolution Advisory Committee, not “forced” upon the participants.

3. The “product” of the process should be clearly identified at the beginning.

Whatever it is the process is going to produce should be clearly identified at the very beginning of the process (e.g. an alternative to be considered by the land management agency during their public NEPA analysis).

4. The “decision process” must be identified at the beginning.

Whatever process that will be used for formal decision-making, i.e. majority vote, consensus, majority/minority report, etc should be agreed to at the very beginning of the process and adhered to throughout.

5. Agency must clearly state how it will utilize the “product.”

The federal land management agency must clearly state how it intends to use the “product” of any formal Collaborative Planning Process at the very beginning.

BlueRibbon also published some good resources for more on collaboration. Here are links:

COLLABORATIVE PLANNING . . . WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW:

<http://www.sharetrails.org/magazine.cfm?story=626>

And:

COLLABORATIVE PLANNING IN CYBERSPACE

<http://www.sharetrails.org/magazine.cfm?story=627>

Much like the 20-year-old process the Japanese invented called Quality Circles – where the factory workers develop the best delivery solution for the factory -- we, the users of the land can develop the best solution for managing the land, if only we can work together with something like a collaborative process with all sides of the issues working together in the spirit of true cooperation. Get it right from the start and it’s worth your time.

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