

Public Engagement and Why it's OK to Have a Bad Time Sometimes

Rob Dumouchel

AMMA Conference 2023

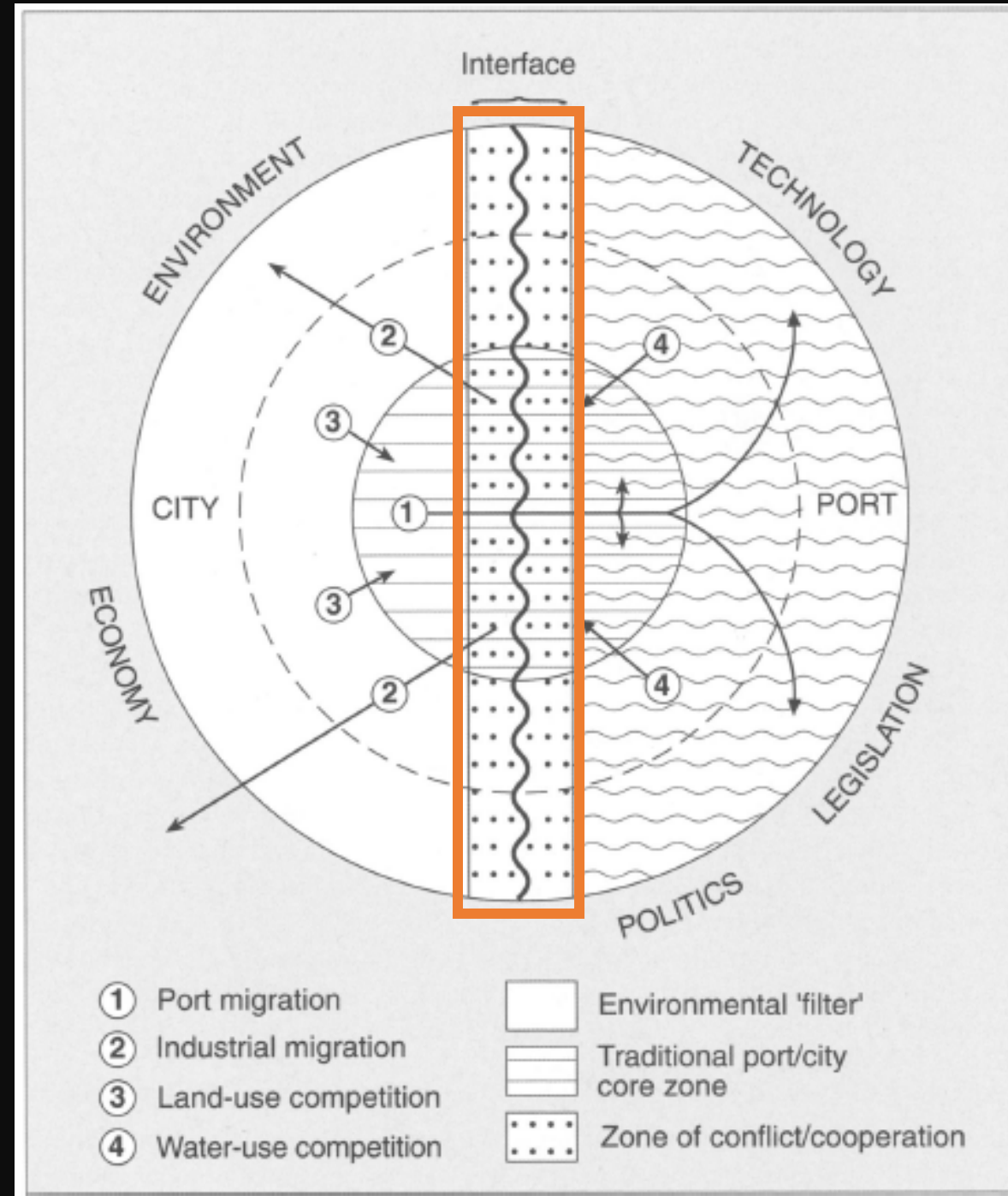
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You're Supposed to Have a Bad Time Sometimes... it's Science

Different fields of social science have models and/or frameworks that illustrate how conflict, uncertainty, awkwardness, and uncomfortability are necessary parts of doing the public's business.

Acknowledge the discomfort and embrace it as a valuable part of the public process.

“the waterfront and its redevelopment are subsumed within a controversial port-city interface zone of conflict and only occasional collaboration” – B.S. Hoyle, 2000





**What I hear when I'm being yelled at
is people caring loudly at me.**



Hi I'm Rob D

- Local Government since 2015
- City Manager in Homer since 2020
- MS Environmental & Natural Resource Science from Humboldt State University
- MBA and an *almost* complete MSDM from University of Alaska Fairbanks
- Unofficially the most bearded City Manager in America



Why is Being a City Manager so Hard?

Difficult Problems

Dynamic Expectations

Difficult People

... all occurring at the same time

ALASKAN CITY MANAGER

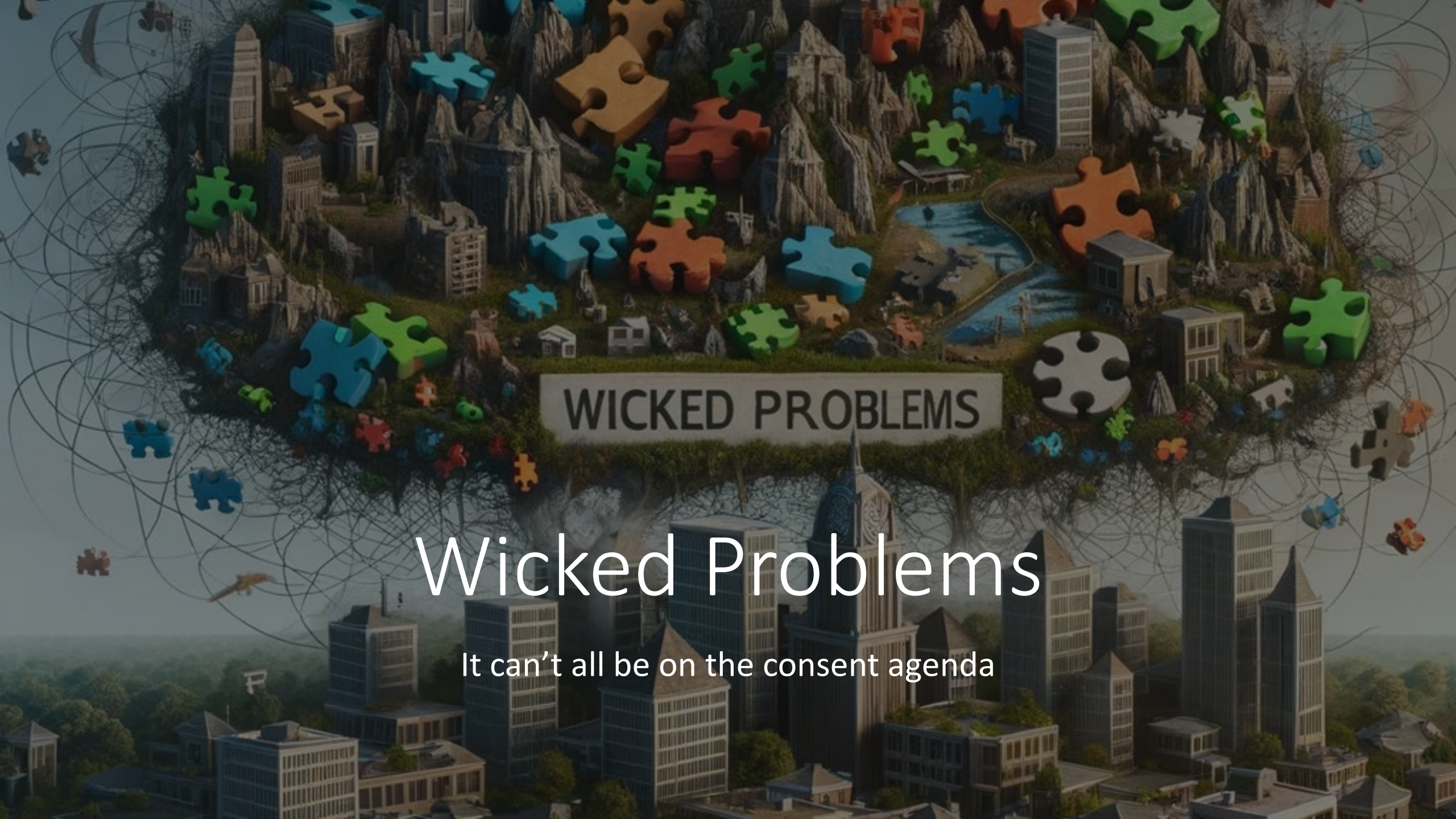


This creature has adapted to the crushing pressure
and oppressive darkness.



Today's Pathway


- Wicked Problems
 - Shifting Baselines
 - Polarization
 - Controversy Spillover
 - The Groan Zone
 - The Value of Public Engagement
-

The image is a complex 3D digital composition. At the top, a globe-like structure is formed by a dense network of thin, grey, tangled lines. Scattered across this globe are numerous 3D puzzle pieces in various colors: blue, green, orange, and brown. Below the globe, a landscape features a winding blue river, a small bridge, and several buildings. In the foreground, a cityscape with various skyscrapers and buildings is visible. The overall scene is layered and intricate, suggesting a complex system or a multi-faceted problem.

WICKED PROBLEMS

Wicked Problems

It can't all be on the consent agenda



What are Wicked Problems?

- “[Wicked problems] are complex, unpredictable, open ended, or intractable.”
- “Wicked problems seem incomprehensible and resistant to solution”
- Wicked problems are something that City Managers and Councils deal with all the time

The
'WICKED
PROBLEMS



Examples of Wicked Problems in Local Govt

- Housing & Homelessness
- Public Safety & Crime Prevention
- Climate Change Adaptation
- Public Health & COVID-19
- Urban Planning & Development

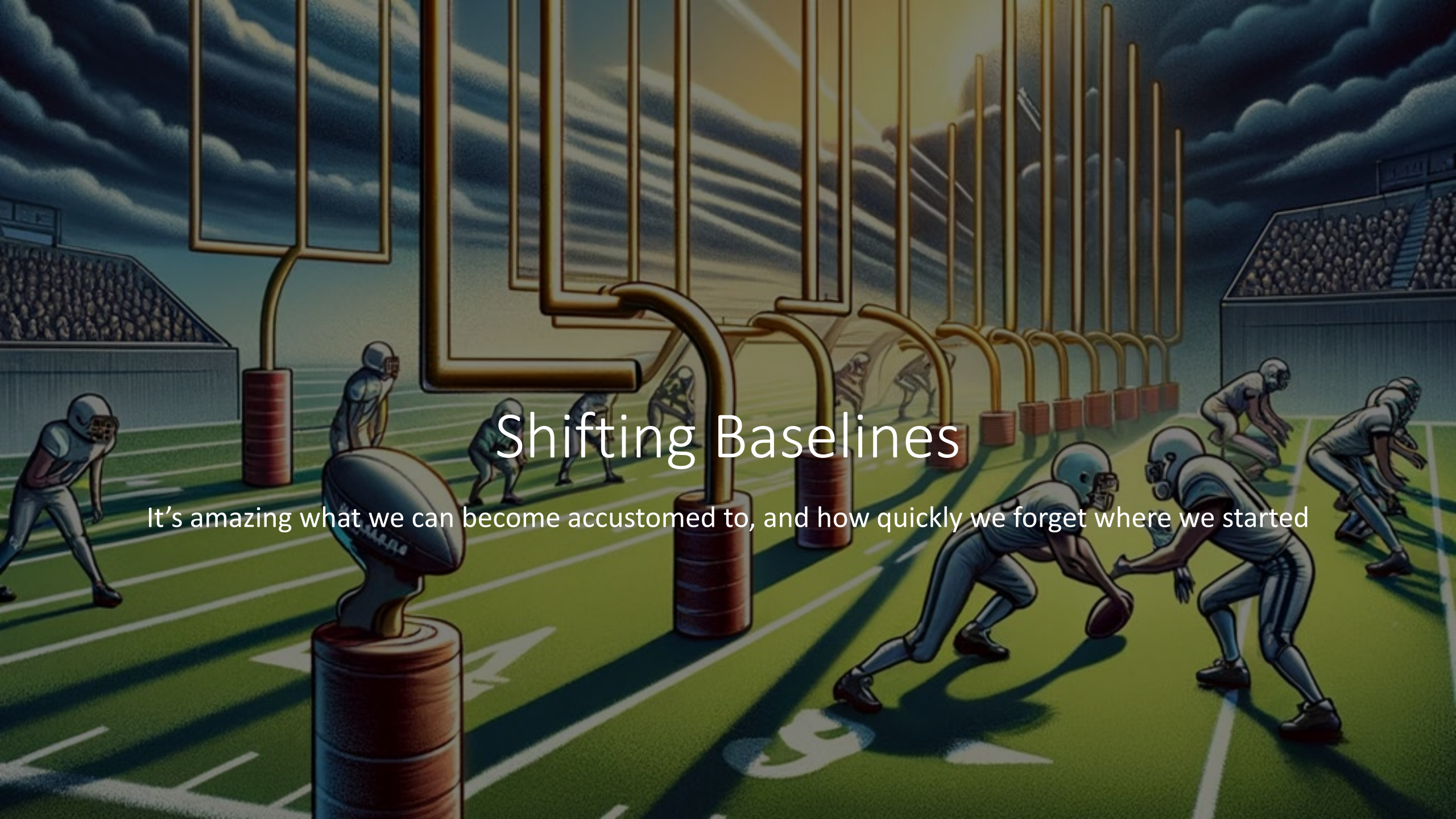
The
'WICKED
PROBLEMS

Properties of Wicked Problems

- Every wicked problem is essentially unique and there is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem
- There is no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem
- There is no opportunity to learn by trial-and-error, every attempt counts significantly, and the planner has no right to be wrong
- There are unlimited ways to attempt to solve wicked problems

The Wicked Problems Mindset

- Presume wicked problems, not wicked people
- Become more comfortable with uncertainty
- Focus on elevating the conversation, not just winning the argument
- Put your energy toward identifying, engaging, and negotiating inherent tensions
- Work toward creating a learning community



Shifting Baselines

It's amazing what we can become accustomed to, and how quickly we forget where we started



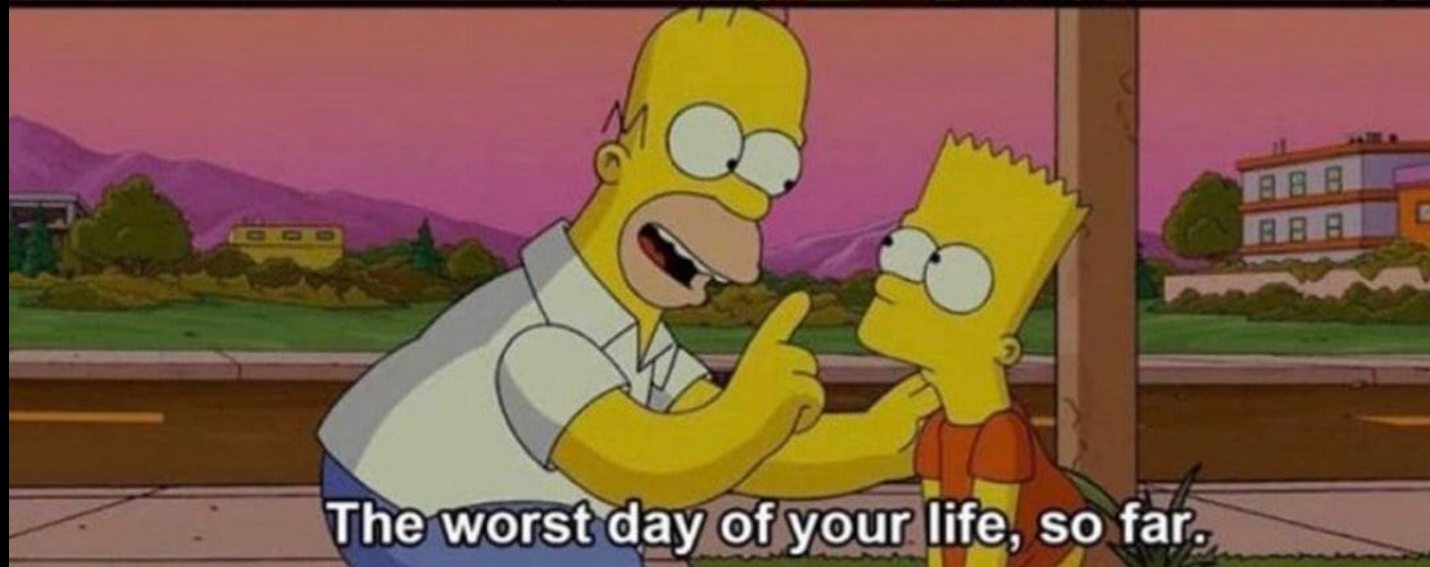
Shifting Baseline Syndrome

“SBS describes a gradual change in the accepted norms for the condition of the natural environment due to lack of human experience, memory and/or knowledge of its past condition”

This environmental concept can easily be seen and applied in local government settings



This is the worst day of my life.



The worst day of your life, so far.

Consequences of SBS Applied to Local Gov't



Increased societal tolerance for degradation of conditions in local gov't public engagement



Alteration of expectations for what is a desirable state of discourse in government decreasing the productivity of the decision-making environment



False perceptions of past conditions resulting in inappropriate or unreasonable goals for the public and elected officials

A narrow, cobblestone alleyway at night, flanked by brick buildings. A large, bright fire is burning out of a blue metal trash can in the center of the street. The fire is intense, with bright orange and yellow flames reaching up into the dark sky. The alleyway is dimly lit by street lamps on either side, and the buildings have arched windows and doorways. The overall atmosphere is one of chaos and destruction.

Political Polarization

It can't be like this forever... right?

Political Polarization

“Political polarization occurs when subsets of a population adopt increasingly dissimilar attitudes toward parties and party members (i.e., affective polarization), as well as ideologies and policies (ideological polarization)”



Political Polarization

- In order to avoid people with whom they disagree, Americans will:
 - Accept smaller paychecks
 - Move to new places that better match their political views
 - Swipe left on people with whom they disagree politically





Why is Polarization
so Pervasive?

**We're built
for it!**



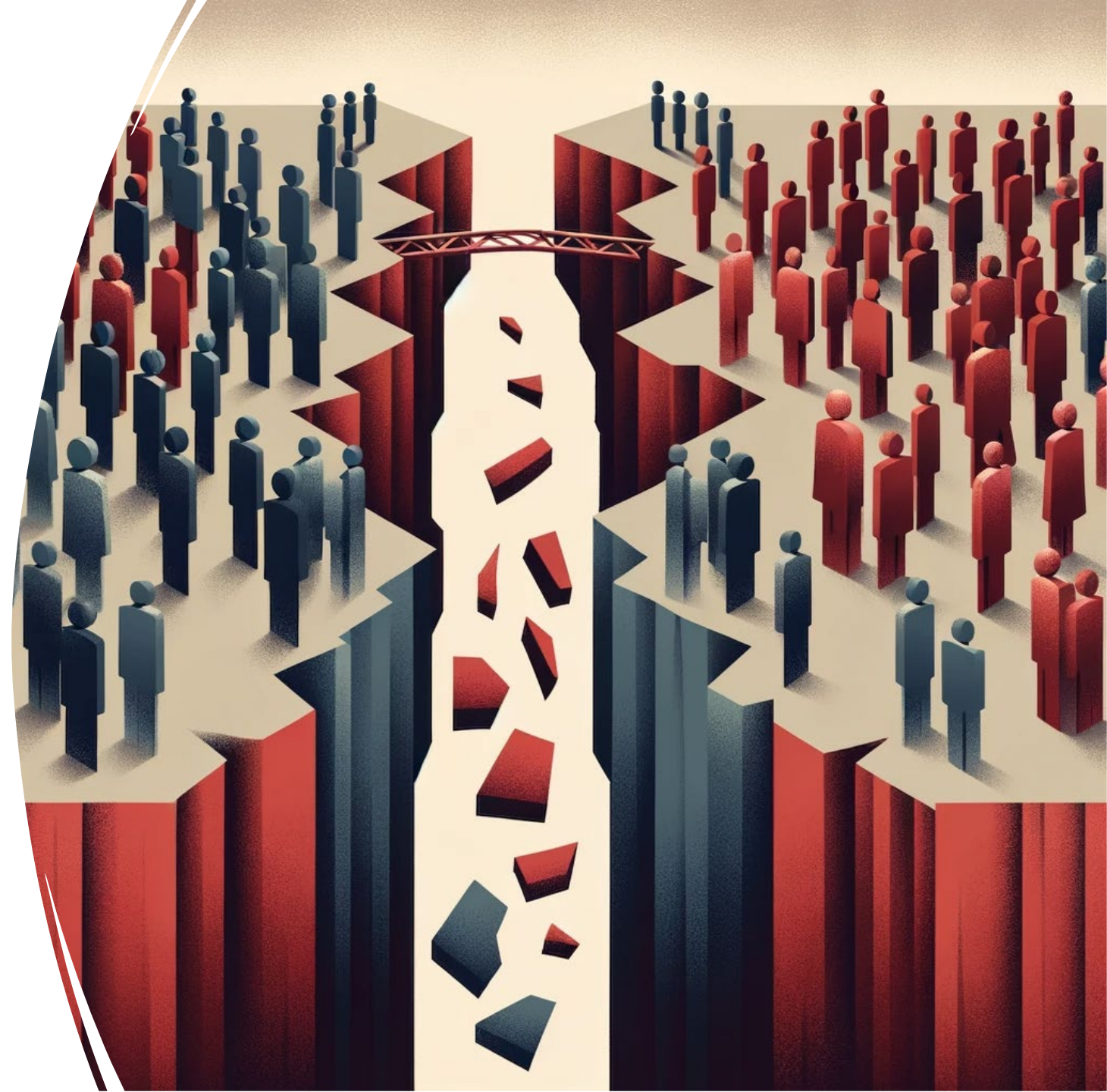
Why is Polarization so Pervasive?

Humans are wired to:

- Crave certainty and consistency
- Love simplistic good versus evil narratives
- Gather with like-minded people
- Cherry pick evidence that supports our views

Flavors of Political Polarization

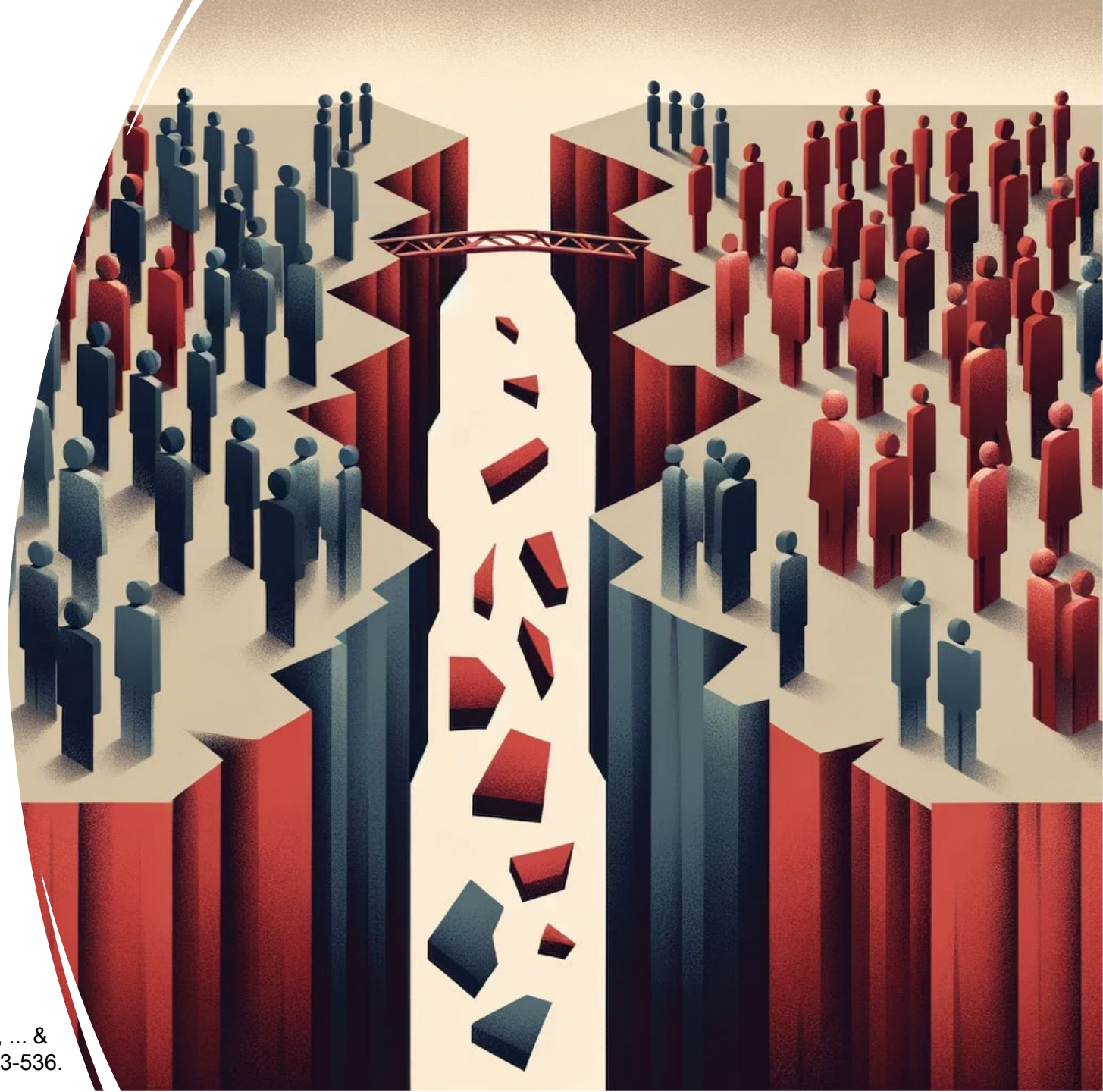
- Affective polarization – based on feelings
- Ideological polarization – based on beliefs, values and ideologies
- Geographic polarization – i.e., urban versus rural)
- Cultural polarization – based on cultural values and practices
- Toxic polarization – extreme form that can lead to violence and breakdown of norms
- Political sectarianism – the tendency to adopt a moralized identification with one political group and against another



Elements of Political Sectarianism

- Othering – the tendency to view opposing partisans as essentially different or alien to oneself
- Aversion – the tendency to dislike and distrust opposing partisans
- Moralization – the tendency to view opposing partisans as iniquitous (wicked, extremely immoral)

“When all three converge, political losses can feel like existential threats that must be averted – whatever the cost.”





The Future of Polarization?

Possible Future #1: Polarization is a self-reinforcing cycle that will continue to increase

Possible Future #2: Polarization is a pendulum that has reached its apex



The Future of Polarization?

“existing empirical findings provide mixed evidence as to which of the possible futures is in fact emerging”

Translation: We don't know

We Can Fix Polarization, Right?

“One key factor in determining which will win out may be **whether political and media institutions are able to combat misperceptions of polarization.** To the extent they do so successfully, this might intercept polarization’s self-perpetuating cycle, and help re-establish the existence of at least some common ground between the parties.”

Analysis: Uh oh



A Glimmer of Hope in Local Gov't?

“Shifting from our dominant, bias-inducing processes at the national level will be exceedingly difficult. The adversarial forces tied to the current system are simply too strong. **At the local level, however, my optimism finds a home.** I believe cities will (and must) step up to save our democracy. **Mayors and city managers can't play political games as much; they must find ways to work together to address their wicked problems.**”





Controversy Spillover

Other problems are also your
problem, even if they're not actually
your problem



Controversy Spillover

Controversy spillover occurs when stakeholders connect other events and technologies to your issue which creates a larger controversy with different dynamics than the original controversy

“Controversy spillover involves both deliberate strategic attempts by actors to shape policy framing as well as unintentional and emergent spillovers”

3 Major Types of Controversy Spillover

- Spatial: A controversy in one place may spill over to another place
- Technological: A controversy on one technology may spill over to another technology
- Temporal/Historical: A controversy may arise from earlier controversies about other policy issues within a region

Spillover Spreads 3 Ways

- Spontaneously: A stakeholder makes an unprompted connection between an existing controversy and the new controversy
- Prompted: Stakeholders make the connection, based on pre-existing opinions, after a separate controversy is mentioned
- Primed: Where a stakeholder, or group, makes the connection and purposefully provides that information to others

Controversy Spillover Considerations for Local Gov't

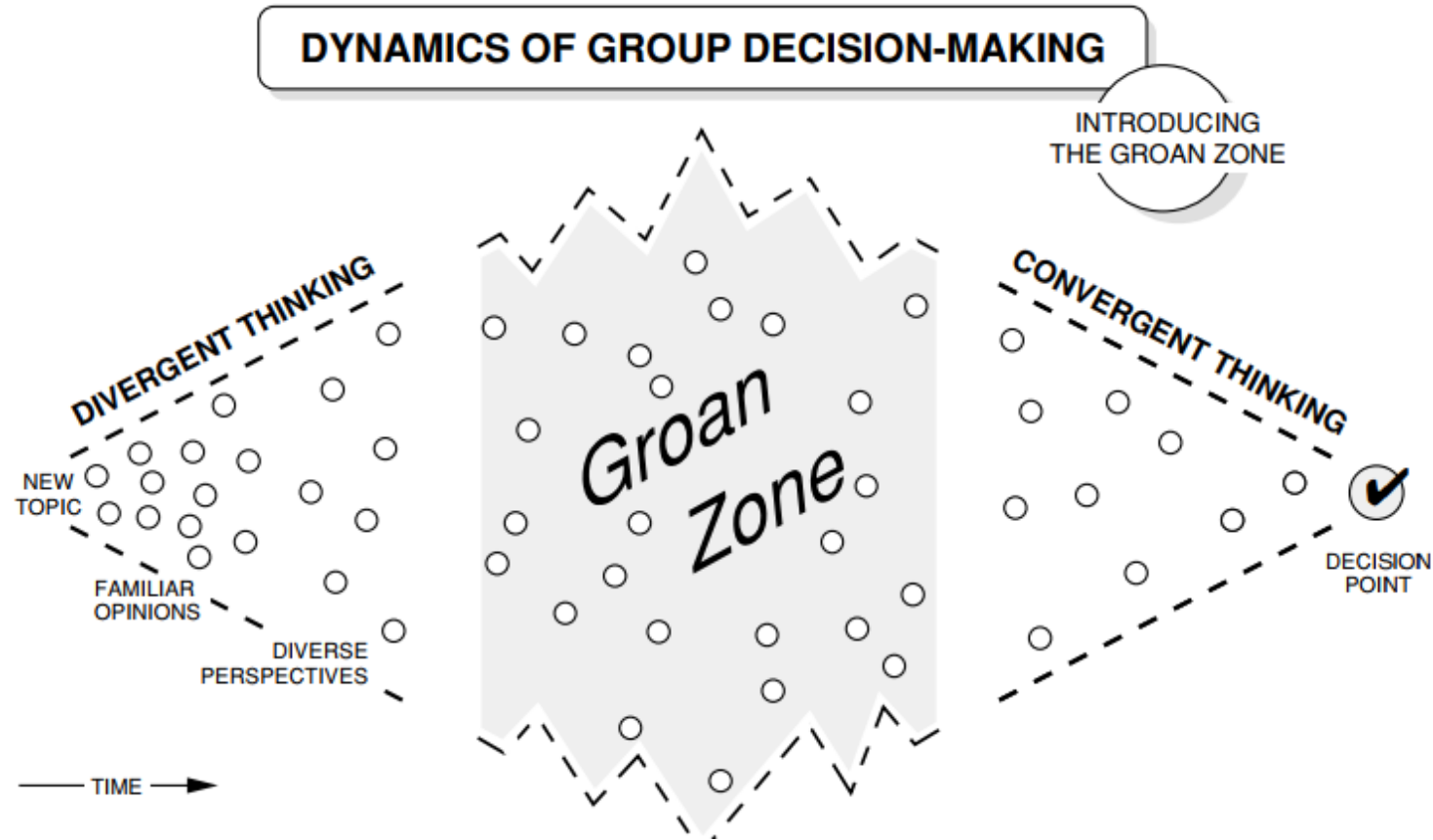
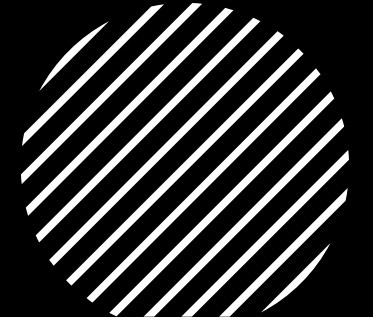
- A controversy spillover mindset can make a policymaking body more adaptable and flexible in their decision making
- Analyzing situations for this concept can help policymakers and planners anticipate controversy spillover
- Research shows that the way policymakers respond to controversy is key in how a spillover unfolds
- Pro-Tip: “Rather than trying to avoid perception spillover or to ‘communicate around’ it, it may be more beneficial to openly acknowledge and attempt to move past it”

The Groan Zone

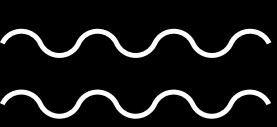
The part in the middle sucks, and that's called democracy



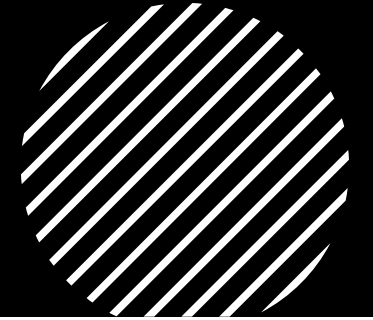
The Groan Zone Visualized



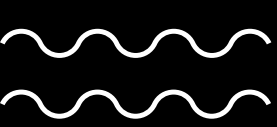
Quote from: Kaner, S. (2014). *Facilitator's guide to participatory decision-making*. John Wiley & Sons.



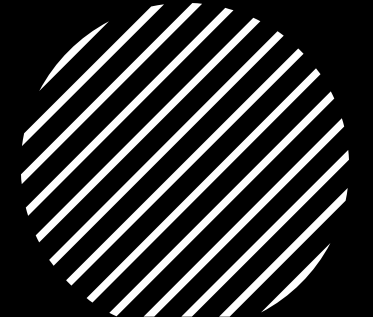
Groan Zone Concepts



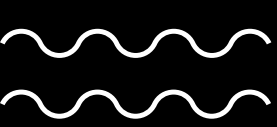
- A period of confusion and frustration is a natural part of group decision-making.
- Once a group crosses the line from airing familiar opinions to exploring diverse perspectives, group members have to struggle in order to integrate new and different ways of thinking with their own.



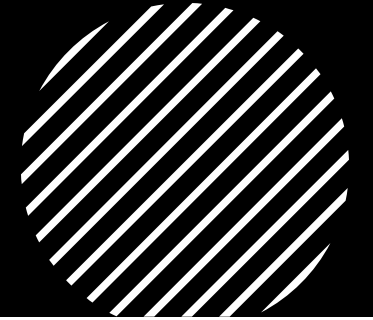
Groan Zone Observations



- When people experience discomfort in the midst of a group decision-making process, they often take it as evidence that their group is dysfunctional. As their impatience increases, so does their disillusion with the process
- Many projects are abandoned prematurely for exactly this reason. In such cases, it's not that the goals were ill conceived; it's that the Groan Zone was perceived as an insurmountable impediment rather than as a normal part of the process



Groan Zone Observations



- Misunderstanding and miscommunication are normal, natural aspects of participator decision-making. The Groan Zone is a direct, inevitable consequence of the diversity that exists in any group.
- **Groups that can tolerate the stress of the Groan Zone are far more likely to discover common ground. And common ground, in turn, is the precondition for insightful, innovative co-thinking**

The Infinite Groan Zone – A Local Dilemma

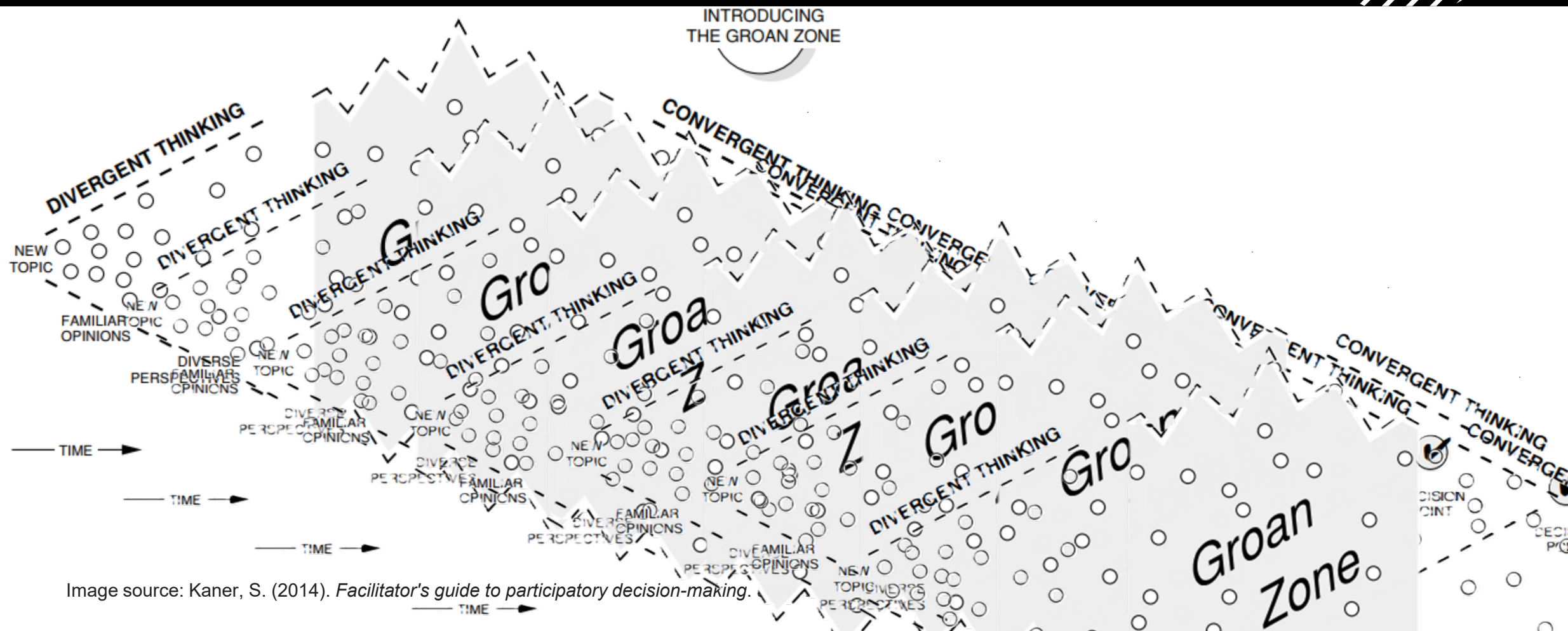


Image source: Kaner, S. (2014). *Facilitator's guide to participatory decision-making*.



So... Public
Engagement
is Worth it,
Right?

Obviously yes, but not for
every item on your agenda



Why is Local Gov't so in Love with Public Engagement Anyways?

“Citizen involvement builds trust in government, which is paramount in a democracy.” – Young and Tanner

“That’s a pretty good reason.” – Rob D.

Alaska Context for Public Engagement

Alaska is very rooted in an ethos of local control and my observation is that public engagement is highly valued in Local Government

... yet...

Polarization, declines in civility, abandonment of social norms, and trends like “Zoom-bombing” are undermining the enthusiasm of practitioners and elected officials for public engagement

Articles on the Value of Public Engagement

Journal of Risk Research
Vol. 11, No. 6, September 2008, 821–835

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

DOI: 10.1111/padm.12867

ORIGINAL **Citizen Participation in Decision Making: Is It Worth the Effort?**
Renée A. Irvin; John Stansbury
Public Administration Review; Jan/Feb 2004; 64, 1; ABI/INFORM Global
pg. 55

Renée A. Irvin
University of Oregon

John Stansbury
University of Nebraska

Citizen Participation in Decision Making: Is It Worth the Effort?

It is widely argued that increased community participation in government decision making produces many important benefits. Dissent is rare: It is difficult to envision anything but positive outcomes from citizens joining the policy process, collaborating with others and reaching consensus to bring about positive social and environmental change. This article, motivated by contextual problems encountered in a participatory watershed management initiative, reviews the citizen-participation literature and analyzes key considerations in determining whether community participation is an effective policy-making tool. We list conditions under which community participation may be costly and ineffective and when it can thrive and produce the greatest gains in effective citizen governance. From the detritus of an unsuccessful citizen-participation effort, we arrive at a more informed approach to guide policy makers in choosing a decision-making process that is appropriate for a community's particular needs.

Introduction

"CBEP (Community-Based Environmental Protection) is designed to maximize the use of scarce resources, encourage local support, and consider the well-being of communities."

Arguments for enhanced citizen participation often rest on the merits of the process and the belief that an engaged citizenry is better than a passive citizenry (King, Feltey, and Susel 1998; Putnam 1995; Arstein 1969). With citizen participation, formulated policies might be more real-

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Most Public Engagement Is Worse Than Worthless

Ruben Anderson · August 6, 2018

Ruben Anderson is a long-time member of Strong Towns and consultant on sustainability and regenerative systems. Today he's sharing a guest article in response to Strong Towns founder [Chuck Marohn's thoughts](#) on the value (or lack thereof) of public engagement.

Chuck Marohn's Strong Towns article entitled "[Most Public Engagement is Worthless](#)" grabbed my attention. The article is fantastic, and the comments are getting richer and richer as I write this. But I would like to go a bit further.

I think most public engagement is *beyond* worthless. I think it actually corrodes the relationships we need in order to build a strong town. Most public engagement, as it is currently conducted, makes our cities worse places.

Does this mean that I am saying we should abandon public engagement? Most definitely not. But I think we need to understand behavior, relationships, and expertise a lot better if we are going to do



Advantages of Citizen Participation in Gov't Decision Making

Learn from and inform citizens

Gain legitimacy of decisions

Build trust and strategic alliances while avoiding litigation

Create better policy and implementation decisions



Disadvantages of Citizen Participation in Gov't Decision Making

Time consuming

Costly; Decreases budget for implementation of actual projects

May backfire, creating more hostility toward government and political pressure for bad decisions

Does Public Engagement Have the Impact We Think it Does?

The Good News

“Citizens and bureaucrats often have differing views and levels of influence over public decision. This is good news because it means bureaucrats do not unduly influence citizens voluntarily engaged in the work of government, even in highly technical science-based work where a lack of knowledge could lead to the group being more easily influenced.”

The Bad News

“Our results illustrate that when bureaucrats and citizens had differing views on public management decisions, it was the bureaucrats who influenced government.”

“If [the] argument is that citizen participation creates emergence and interdependence that corrects for network imbalance and individual interests, then the primary premise upon which [it] rests is a falsity”



So... is Public Engagement is Worth it?

The social science perspective:

“With widespread public benefit as the goal of any public policy process, it behooves the administrator to consider the advantages and disadvantages of the decision-making process when determining the most effective implementation strategy, bearing in mind that talk is not cheap – and may not even be effective” – Irvin & Stansbury

Normal person translation: It depends

My perspective: Most decisions don't really need public engagement; the hard part is identifying the ones that do!



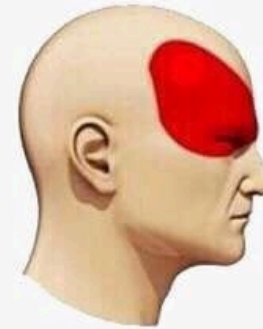
Thoughts for
the Path Ahead

Thoughts for the Path Ahead

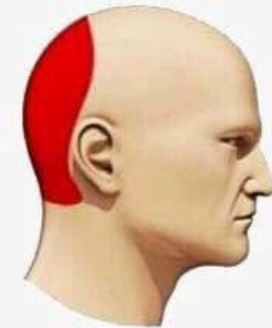
Uncertainty and conflict are necessary, and scientifically proven, parts of the process, embrace them

Types of Headaches

Migraine



Hypertension



Stress

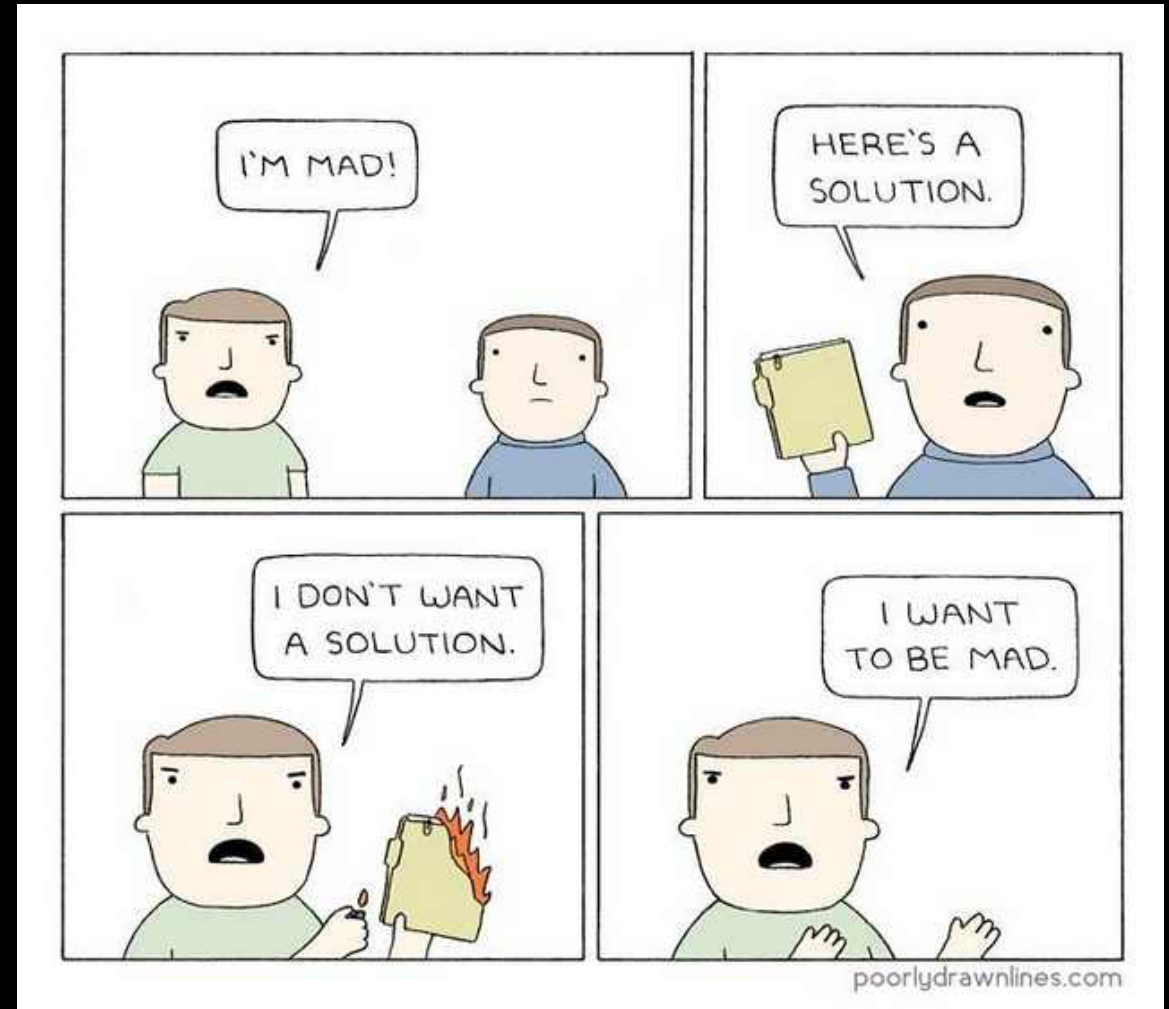


Eureka city council



Thoughts for the Path Ahead

If the public and Council don't like the solution, it doesn't matter that you're "right"



Thoughts for the Path Ahead

Do it right, or do it
twice... there are no
shortcuts



Thoughts for the Path Ahead

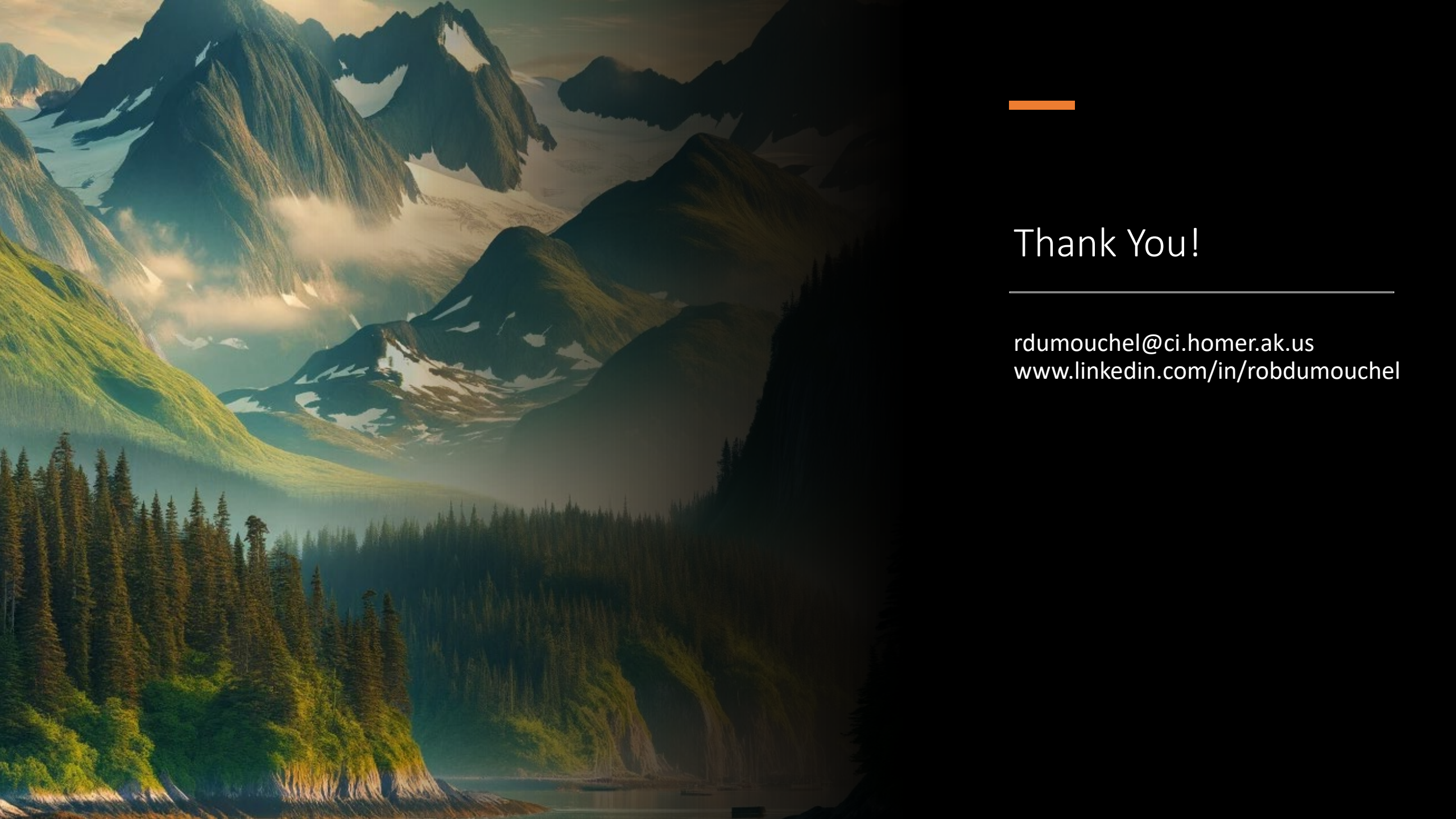
You have outsized
influence in public
engagement
situations as a City
Manager, don't abuse
it



Thoughts for the Path Ahead

Don't read the
comments





Thank You!



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