

# A Manager's Precarious Exercise with a Sports Complex

by Toby Dougherty

**H**ays is a regional shopping, medical, and agricultural center with a population of 20,000 in west-central Kansas. The city has a strong Volga German heritage, but it is becoming more diverse owing to recent economic growth, along with incoming personnel at the Hays Medical Center and faculty and students at Fort Hays State University. Hays is one of the few cities in the western half of the state that is thriving at a time when many are experiencing a decrease in population and slowing economies.

For many years, residents and governmental leaders have talked about the need for a large-scale sports complex to serve the community and region. Between 1998 and 2003, the city passed two successful special purpose sales taxes to fund the building of a new library and a new aquatic park.

In 2002, citizens were presented with a ballot measure proposing a sales tax to fund, among other things, park improvements, additional fire stations, roads, and a sports complex. The sales tax measure failed, but key citizens were undeterred, and they continued to hold out hope for a major sports complex.

In July 2007, a group of citizens approached me—the newly appointed city manager—about resurrecting the issue of a sports complex for Hays. The city has a strong history of city management, and it is not unusual for those familiar with government operations to approach the manager before or while they are working with the city commission.

Although I was newly appointed, I had been the assistant city manager for two and a half years prior to the previous manager's retirement, and I had become familiar with the issue and the local norms for public policy development. The group was composed of several key supporters of the previous sports complex issue. Many of the advocates were noted residents, and their efforts could not be ignored.

Group members wanted the complex to be a city project, and they were willing to offer their assistance in any way possible. I told them that I did not think the commission would be interested in pursuing the project because the city had more pressing needs. The commission had already identified stormwater improvements as a pressing need. A stormwater master plan had been completed, and planned projects amounted to approximately \$8 million.

The holdup in implementing stormwater improvements was funding. We also had several major arterial streets that needed to be rebuilt at a price of at least \$15 million. It was my hope to possibly fund one or both of these needs through a sales tax, and I planned to suggest this to the commission in the near future.

### **NOT DISCOURAGED**

My comments, which the group members knew I had shared with the commission, did not discourage them, and they did not drop the issue. They continued to meet, discussing possible locations and funding mechanisms. I communicated with the mayor and commission to keep them informed as best as I knew of the group's activities.

As I expected, the commission had no interest in pursuing an athletic complex. I met with the group and passed on these sentiments. I told the group that if they wanted to continue it would have to be a grassroots effort.

I was aware of my precarious position. On the one hand, I was convinced that the commission as well as city staff did not consider the sports complex a priority. On the other hand, I knew that those involved were prominent, active citizens, and the last thing I wanted to do was to give them cause to disengage. Further, I did not want to act in a way that would put the commissioners in a difficult position in relation to the group. I needed to be kept informed of what the group members were doing so they would not get too far down a path that would not work administratively if they were successful. This meant I needed to maintain good contact and relations with them.

It was clear to me that the commis-



sioners did not favor the project, and I did not want to appear too supportive of the group's efforts. There existed the possibility that I could become crosswise with the commission if it seemed I was assisting the group too much.

The group had several questions that required the expertise of city staff. I met with the group to lay down some ground rules for staff involvement and let the group know that staff members would address their questions to the best of their abilities but would not drop everything to do so. I also made it extremely clear that whatever funding mechanism the group ended up proposing must include operation and maintenance of the facility because the general fund could not absorb these added expenditures.

The group continued to meet, discussing the issue with several landowners. In conversations with staff, they also explored several financing options. In late 2007, the group came to a city commission work session in a public effort to get commission buy-in for the project. Commissioners expressed no interest in the project—for the first time formally indicating to the group what it had already learned informally and piecemeal.

### **STILL NOT DISCOURAGED**

Undeterred again, in early 2008, the

group proposed a location involving a land swap between the city of Hays and Kansas State University, which has an outreach presence in the city. The group suggested that the commission discuss its proposal at the commission's annual planning retreat. Commissioners reviewed the proposal and were unconvinced, citing location, monetary issues, lack of support for the necessary land, and the fact that the project did not fit into the commission's priorities.

Advocates expressed their passion, and their frustration mounted with their failure to understand why the commission showed so little interest. I met with the group and tried to point out the "big picture" of competing priorities that faced the commissioners. I discussed their priorities and the process they had gone through to determine them. I reminded the group that there were other high-dollar projects that ranked above an athletic complex, including stormwater and street improvements.

The group became even more organized. City staff and I maintained regular contact with group members, and in July 2008 the group attended another commission work session with an innovative, more palatable plan involving Fort Hays State University. This university was in the process of implementing an intercollegiate soccer

program and making plans to build a soccer stadium. The president of the university offered to partner with the city in order to construct both projects at one location, making it a beneficial scenario for both parties.

At a work session, the group asked commissioners to place the issue on the November ballot. Now the commission found itself in a precarious position, as more than 150 project supporters attended the work session. The commission stood firm, expressing its conviction that support of the

widespread business and community support and ended up submitting a petition on time with more than twice as many signatures as required.

Although the commission had wished to remain hands-off, city staff, recognizing an obligation to the community, worked with the sports complex group to make certain that it got the correct legal language on the ballot.

For the advocates, the city commission's lack of enthusiasm for the issue turned out to be a good thing.

## ISSUE PASSES

In November 2008, the issue passed amid a period of strong economic uncertainty. Once passed, it became a city project. The commission embraced the project as the will of the people. At no time did commission members publicly lament that the issue had passed although many of them felt there were more important projects on which to spend public money. Although they conveyed to the community the costs that would be encountered with passage of the initiative, they readjusted their priorities in good faith.

As elected and appointed officials, we appreciate and encourage grassroots efforts and civic involvement, which we often assume means that fewer people will look to the government for all of their answers. We learned, however, that an engaged and involved public will not always have the same goals or visions as the local government or its leaders.

Citizen engagement and grassroots efforts will not always mean neighborhood groups cleaning up properties, ministerial alliances feeding and clothing the poor, and Optimist or Rotary members donating playground equipment for parks. Sometimes grassroots efforts involve groups attempting to use the political process to identify long-term capital projects that determine public priorities at odds with an elected body's priorities.

## THE MANAGER'S ROLE

The challenge revealed in this case lies in the question of the manager's role when a grassroots effort deflects priorities of the elected officials. In the Hays case, if the commission and staff had totally ignored or stifled the grassroots effort, it could have led to disaffection and disengagement more generally.

If staff had not assisted the advocacy group, the group could have succeeded but possibly with a plan that was not feasible. Without commission endorsement, however, staff assistance had to be measured. This is where my job came into focus for me.

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athletic complex would jeopardize established priorities.

Commissioners conveyed the message that success with the project would have to depend on a grassroots effort. They suggested that the group use the petition process to put the question on the ballot.

## MOVING ALONG QUICKLY, BUT CAREFULLY

Working with city staff, it was determined that a half-cent sales tax for four years would raise a minimum of \$10 million. What the group proposed was a four-year sales tax with \$8 million going toward construction and the remainder being segregated and used for ongoing operation and maintenance for a minimum period of 10 years. Fort Hays State University was willing to sell land to the city for this complex.

After attending the commission work session in July, the group had only a short time to get a petition drive under way as the petition had to be certified by the county clerk by the end of August so it could be placed on the November ballot. The group mobilized

The group had to mobilize quickly in order to get the petition signed, but group members also had to sell the concept. Members confided in me that they felt the commission pushed them into taking even more of an ownership role in selling the issue.

Advocacy did not stop after the issue was placed on the November ballot. Prior to the election, the group talked to as many service groups and organizations as it could. It hosted a town hall meeting and also raised money to undertake a large advertising campaign.

During the period before the election, city staff were placed in a difficult situation. The commission had made it very clear that this was not "their project"; however, staff needed to offer assistance and provide legal counsel on financing questions and bonding issues as well as ballot issues. City staff members were able to accomplish this and still maintain a separation from the campaign itself, in large part because of the professionalism of the staff and an understanding in the community about the political neutrality of city staff.

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While formulating the group's plan, members of the group had questions that needed to be answered by the commission regarding financing, design, and location. At first, the commissioners wanted to ignore the questions. I suggested to them that simply weighing in on a question of detail did not mean that they were supportive of the project.

I also had a similar discussion with city staff. Several staff members were not in favor of this project and simply wished the group would go away. I reminded them that there was a very good possibility that this group would not only get the question on the ballot but also succeed with voters, and the project would be ours to deal with. I reminded staff that if this were the case, it would be best for us if the group was already heading down a road familiar to us.

#### FINAL MOVES

After the issue was on the ballot, the commission was silent. Commissioners realized they could speak out publicly against the project, and this would make it more difficult to pass; however, every commissioner chose to let residents make up their own minds.

I felt I was placed in a difficult position during the period after the measure qualified for the ballot but before the election. I had made it clear to the group that the project was not at the top of my or the commission's priority list. If asked by the public or the press, how would I respond?

I did not want to sabotage the project, but I understood that if the issue passed it would mean another special sales tax project could not likely be undertaken for at least five years and, more than likely, six to eight years, and our stormwater and street maintenance needs might go unheeded.

In the end, I did not publicly offer an opinion on the issue and was not asked by the press to do so. As a professional, I am still uncertain about whether this was the right thing to do. The fundamental question was: if the manager does not believe a project is in the best interest of the community, is it not the manager's duty to try to point the public in the right direction?

After grappling with this situa-

tion for a long time, I chose to remain silent on the issue, confining my thoughts to discussions with the commissioners—the elected representatives of the people. I determined that this was a policy decision that was within the commission's area of responsibility. Although my professional colleagues might disagree, if I had been asked by the press what my thoughts were, I would have been completely honest.

If I had been asked about the value of the sports complex, my response would have been that it would add to the quality of life in our community but at a potential cost to basic infrastructure projects that still need to be addressed. Those issues remain, and the community still must find a way

to deal with them. Eventually we will have no choice but to deal with them. I hate to see things reach that point.

After the issue passed, I met with the staff and reminded them that the people had spoken. As a result, we would approach the project with the same enthusiasm as if it had been our own idea. It will be a measure of our professionalism if we can live up to that reminder. **PM**

Editorial note: I am grateful to John Nalbandian, professor of public administration, University of Kansas, Lawrence, for his guidance and encouragement in preparation of this article.

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## PM Self-Funded Health Initiative for Local Governments

The Foundation For Caregivers, Chantilly, Virginia, is offering community leaders an innovative turnkey program, Weigh To Give, to promote health in this time of deficit dollars and bleak budgets. The program can be used to engage an entire community in an online, fun event that makes weight loss a charitable mission.

Weigh To Give (<http://weighttogive.org>) can be used by anyone to promote a healthier lifestyle or it can be used as a fundraiser. It is a vendor- and charity-neutral weight-loss-a-thon designed to engage the public sector, the private sector, nonprofits, and individuals in weight management while funding community charities.

Weight management largely depends on individual behavior, but developers of the system anticipate that most participants in Weigh To Give will pledge to lose 10 to 15 pounds in a 60- or 90-day period. The system will track actual pounds lost to provide a measurable outcome.

The Foundation For Caregivers would like to see two million people lose more than 10 million pounds and raise \$50 million for charity in the process. The foundation has placed a fundraising estimator on the Weigh To Give Web site that will enable community and business leaders to play "what if" for their community or organization.

All sponsor dollars will be directed to two charities: 75 percent to the participant's designated charity and 25 percent to the Foundation For Caregivers. The foundation will use the proceeds to fund care-giving organizations and researchers working to ease the physical, financial, and emotional burden of America's family caregivers. The Foundation For Caregivers, established in 2005, is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit group.

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