

## **A Strategic Framework for Building Civic Capacity**

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*Abstract:* Wicked problems such as education, housing, or transportation prompt fundamental disagreements about the nature of urban issues as well as appropriate solutions. Only extraordinary initiatives that blend political conflict and cooperation to marshal resources and joint commitments from multiple stake holders offer the potential to address them. This article develops a framework of strategic mechanisms that support such initiatives, and compares their interactions in the fields of urban growth and transportation over the past two decades in Seattle. The framework suggests that the *civic capacity* to address wicked problems depends on a combination of *networks*, *governance institutions*, and *leadership*. While networks, governance institutions, and problem wickedness differ across policy areas, the study finds that acts of leadership can reshape them over time to “tame” and address wicked problems. The conclusion draws lessons for strategic efforts to build civic capacity, and generates hypotheses for future research.

## **A Strategic Framework for Building Civic Capacity**

Students of urban politics have documented both promise and difficulty in attempts to build civic capacity to address longstanding policy problems in big cities. Embodied in an array of actors working together to address a pressing policy issue, civic capacity features shared problem definitions and joint commitments from a broad range of elites and grassroots actors (Stone, Henig, et al. 2001). Most research on civic capacity has focused primarily on measuring or tracing the development of shared problem definitions and joint commitments (e.g., Marschall and Shah; Stone 2001; Stone, Henig, et al. 2001; Briggs 2008).

While building civic capacity is challenging under even the best of circumstances, for “wicked” policy problems, shared problem definitions and joint commitments are particularly elusive (van Beuren, et al. 2010). Research in planning, policy studies, and management indicate key conditions that fundamentally influence the likelihood that actors will agree on problem definitions and commit to addressing policy challenges together. Drawing together these lines of research, this article refines our understanding of the building blocks of civic capacity. It explores how the complexity or wickedness of public problems, in combination with three broad sets of strategic and institutional factors – policy networks, governance institutions, and leadership – shape the prospects for developing civic capacity. The aim is to move studies of civic capacity from rich descriptions of political and policy outcomes (Stone, Henig, et al. 2001; Briggs 2008) toward research strategies that can diagnose and predict the types of outcomes we might expect from different configurations of institutional conditions and leadership strategies.

To understand how problems, networks, institutions, and leadership interact to affect civic capacity, the article compares recent efforts to address urban growth and transportation infrastructure in Seattle. The article first outlines the characteristics of wicked problems. The

literatures on civic capacity, policy networks, collaborative governance, and leadership then serve to develop a strategic framework for building civic capacity. Case studies analyze the way problems, leadership, networks, and governance institutions interacted to shape civic capacity in two policy fields over the past two decades in Seattle. The conclusion draws lessons from the cases and outlines an agenda for future research.

## **A Continuum of Problem Wickedness**

A “wicked problem” lacks a definitive formulation and has multiple, intertwined causes and manifestations. Not only are optimal solutions elusive, but the criteria for evaluating them are hotly contested. Stake holders differ in their views of the problem, the values at stake, and what constitutes appropriate expertise for understanding and addressing the problem (Rittel and Weber 1973). Many cities face problems with these characteristics. Land use, transportation, housing, education, and other pressing issues challenge the ability of policy makers to agree on the contours of problems, much less devise effective solutions that satisfy citizens.

Wicked problems both require and are hostile to joint problem solving. On one hand, they are too multi-faceted, multi-causal, and controversial for one agency or a narrow majority coalition to address. On the other, competing values and problem definitions hinder cross-agency collaboration and broad coalitions. Disagreement about a problem’s definition, moreover, can spawn conflict and distrust that further inhibit collective action (Roberts 2000).

A core challenge of nurturing shared understandings of problems is that, when the definition of a problem and relationships among stake holders are contentious, conceptions of knowledge are subject to dispute as well. With urban infrastructure projects, for example, the expert knowledge of engineers and other specialists can ignore or contradict the concerns of neighborhood residents about quality-of-life factors. When stake holders disagree on what constitutes expertise, they

reflexively view as suspect their opponents' data and arguments, no matter how carefully researched or reasoned. Any quest for shared understanding of a wicked problem therefore must address meaning and values as well as data and logic (Beinecke 2009). Only when stake holders learn together about a wicked problem (Roberts 2000) can they generate shared knowledge that supports collaboration to address it (Weber and Khademian 2008).

The influence of social processes of interpretation on definitions of problems and potential solutions (Rochefort and Cobb 1993) suggests that the wickedness of a problem depends in part on the ways in which key actors understand it and view each other. New knowledge, learning opportunities, and ideas offer the potential to alter the wickedness of a problem – either to “tame” a wicked problem, or to increase its level of wickedness – by affecting shared beliefs about problems and joint approaches to address them (Weber 2009). Wickedness is thus not so much inherent in the nature of a problem itself as it is a function of politically contingent, historically-situated processes.

The extent to which a problem is wicked depends in part on how power, conflict, and relationships are distributed among political actors in an urban policy network. Where a single, cohesive group of actors, such as a business-led urban regime (Stone 1989) or “growth machine” (Logan and Molotch 1976), dominates policy debates, fewer problems are likely to be wicked than in settings in which power is more balanced and a variety of interests can influence policy. Dominant groups can simply impose their problems definitions and preferred policy alternatives on others. Under these circumstances, wicked problems are likely to be restricted to those on which dominant actors disagree.

The more actors who have a stake and a voice in a problem, however, the more likely the problem is to be wicked (Rittel and Webber 1973). If a regime has difficulty coalescing, politics are more pluralistic, or power is more diffuse (e.g., Dahl 1961; DeLeon 1992; Weir et al. 2009),

therefore, more problems may fall toward the wicked end of the continuum. Under these conditions, the diverse problem definitions and views of knowledge that different stake holders hold are likely to fracture and complicate efforts to design and implement policy solutions.

## **The Framework**

Addressing a wicked problem is a daunting challenge of collective action – especially in urban political settings. It requires building a sustainable coalition of stake holders willing to commit resources to solve a complicated problem with unclear and disputed solutions in the face of disagreements about the legitimacy of knowledge itself. As studies of the policy process have found, moreover, policy makers rarely assess problems carefully before considering solutions. Rather than systematically defining the scope and characteristics of a problem, they tend to draw on familiar problem definitions and solutions to craft policies, even when conditions call for new understandings and approaches (Jones and Bachelor 1993, Kingdon 1995).

### **Civic Capacity**

On occasion, nevertheless, when facing a wicked problem and the need for new solutions, leaders in some cities have sought to build the civic capacity to generate alternatives to the existing repertoire of policies. Building civic capacity requires establishing shared understandings of the importance of a public problem (including shared problem definitions) as well as joint commitments from a variety of actors to address the problem (Stone, Henig, et al. 2001). Establishing shared understandings and joint commitments entails a mix of learning and bargaining about various aspects of the problem along with potential solutions (Briggs 2008).

**Shared Understandings:** The research on civic capacity finds it difficult to build and inherently fragile, due to the variety of urban actors, histories of inter-group conflict, and the many issues that compete for their attention (C. Stone 2001). To act together, stake holders must share

some understanding of the nature of a public problem and potential solutions – or of the expertise that can identify and refine shared definitions and prospective solutions. Researchers measure shared understandings of problems by assessing the extent to which elites and the general public agree that a particular issue is worth time and effort to address (Stone, Henig, et al. 2001). They measure shared understanding of solutions by assessing agreement among elites and the public about solutions to problems that they jointly identify as priorities (Marschall and Shah 2005).

**Joint Commitments:** Cultivating civic capacity also requires forging common interests and goals, developing a shared agenda, and acting collectively to address the problem that is the focus of shared understanding (Saegert 2006). When civic leaders build a stable governing coalition, the political will exists to generate resource commitments from an array of actors and institutions to address a problem (Stone, Henig, et al. 2001, Marschall and Shah 2005). In their most potent form, these commitments embody a sustained portfolio of programs and initiatives delivered by a mix of public and private actors to address both causes and symptoms of a problem (Briggs 2008).

Case studies have chronicled the many obstacles to constructing civic capacity and documented only a few successes (Briggs 2008, C. Stone, *Civic Capacity and Urban Education* 2001). Shared understandings, clear goals, and common agendas are rare when stake holders disagree fundamentally about the nature of problems, expertise, and solutions, as is the case with wicked problems. Under these conditions, cultivating political support and resource commitments from a broad range of actors is extremely difficult.

Despite (or perhaps because of) these challenges, studies of civic capacity provide only general guidance about how to build it (e.g., Saegert 2006, Briggs 2008). What guidance exists suggests that civic capacity develops through situation-specific dynamics of learning and bargaining among political actors that unfold within particular configurations of institutional structures and relationships (Briggs 2007; 2008). The framework presented here further specifies and elaborates

key institutional and strategic factors that influence learning and bargaining, including types of problems, policy networks, governance institutions, and leadership functions.

### **Strategic Mechanisms**

The management literature on networks, collaborative governance, and leadership suggests specific ways these mechanisms can help build civic capacity. The case studies below explore the relationships among them and their combined potential to address wicked problems.

**Informal Networks:** Some research on civic capacity has examined civic mobilization – the breadth, cohesion, and durability with which different actors come together to act on their shared understandings of problems and potential solutions (C. Stone 2001, Stone, Henig, et al. 2001). Other researchers have measured the presence of governing coalitions that rest on informal relationships among stake holders in particular policy fields (Marschall and Shah 2005).

These assessments of the breadth, cohesion, and durability of mobilization or of the informal relationships among stake holders are similar to the measures of inter-organizational networks that management scholars have developed (e.g., Provan and Milward 2001). Inter-organizational networks consist of the relationships – or social ties – among representatives of different organizations, as embodied in their exchanges of information, resources, and influence. A network is robust to the extent that most participants have strong relationships with a few central actors (in contrast to having more diffuse relationships with peripheral participants) and to the extent that participants enjoy frequent and collegial exchanges (Jones, Borgatti and Hesterly 1997).

Network relationships shape civic capacity by enabling or constraining actors' interactions and exchanges of resources and ideas, thereby fostering or undermining shared understandings and joint commitments to address a wicked problem. Ties among local, state, and federal actors can generate political and financial resources from different levels of government as well as

experimentation and joint learning to implement broad, multi-faceted policy initiatives (Weir, Rongerude and Ansell 2009, Dorf and Sabel 1998). In some cases, however, competing sub-networks or “advocacy coalitions” may hold deep-seated, opposing beliefs about how to address a problem, creating barriers to shared understanding (Leach and Sabatier 2005). The intensity and quality of network relationships are thus strategic levers that leaders can use to foster shared understanding of a problem or build joint commitments to address it.

**Formal Governance Institutions:** If networks embody actors’ informal relationships, governance institutions are formal entities that bring together representatives of different interests to design or deliver public policies. Examples range from legislatures to special-purpose governments to advisory committees to interagency teams.

Studies of the impact of governance institutions on civic capacity identify two distinct sets of implications. One emphasizes the benefits for a majority coalition of using institutional rules and procedures to consolidate power, limit the influence of less powerful actors, and make binding decisions about policy solutions (Callahan 2007, Laslo and Judd 2006). These “authoritative” tactics may succeed in certain contexts, but encounter difficulties with wicked problems, when even politically feasible solutions are unclear and subject to dispute (Roberts 2000).

In contrast to authoritative approaches to wicked problems, a second set of implications for the impact of governance institutions on civic capacity comes from studies of collaborative governance (Roberts 2000). This literature finds that inclusive dialogues about public problems, prospective solutions, and ways to make progress toward them can cultivate shared understandings and joint commitments (Ansell and Gash 2008, O’Leary and Bingham 2007).

Of course, the conditions surrounding a wicked problem make dialogues of this sort difficult to foster (Bryson, Crosby and Stone 2006). Asymmetries of resources and knowledge, differing incentives for participation, and prior conflict among stake holders hamper collaboration (Ansell

and Gash 2008, Weber 2009). Stake holders' perceptions of legitimacy are therefore crucial to collaborative approaches to wicked problems (O'Leary and Bingham 2007).

Legitimacy, in turn, depends heavily on the structures and processes of formal governance institutions. When governance institutions ensure that the contributions actors make to address a problem and the benefits they stand to gain are equitable and enforceable, actors are more likely to honor their commitments to one another (Ostrom 1990). Including a wide array of participants can increase the legitimacy of collaborative processes as well as the ideas and resources available to address problems (Fung 2006, Ansell and Gash 2008). While broad inclusion increases the transaction costs of making collective decisions, the disagreement and mistrust that surround wicked problems make perceptions of illegitimate governance so likely that most studies find net benefits in inclusiveness (Roberts 2000, Feldman and Khademian 2007). Collaborative governance also benefits from having an exclusive forum for making key decisions – or at least very few such forums – to prevent stake holders from “venue shopping” when their influence in a particular forum declines (Ansell and Gash 2008, O'Leary and Bingham 2007). Additional factors that enhance the legitimacy of collaborative processes include:

- clear ground rules and procedures for stake holders' interactions, attempts to resolve conflicts, and processes for making decisions (Lubell 2005);
- transparent and open discussions and decisions (Susskind and Cruikshank 1987);
- clear authority to make binding – or at least advisory – decisions about policies, programs, and projects (Fung 2006); and
- face-to-face dialogues and good-faith negotiations (Ansell and Gash 2008).

Where collaborators sustain governance institutions with these characteristics over time, they may create standing “civic intermediary” structures. By bringing together an array of actors with

common interests in addressing a wicked problem, supporting their work with staff and an organizational infrastructure, civic intermediaries can:

- increase political support for future problem solving efforts;
- educate and align stake holders to address differences in knowledge and understanding;
- enhance and coordinate actors' capacity to implement collaborative initiatives; and
- invest and monitor projects to improve performance and accountability (Briggs 2008: 87).

**Civic Leadership:** Effective leadership to address wicked problems entails strategic actions that bring stake holders together across sectors to discuss issues and devise solutions. While mayors, as cities' chief executives, may be central to building civic capacity (Marschall and Shah 2005), civic leadership is not confined to mayors. It may be distributed among various actors (Spillane 2006), and is better understood as a set of functions than as the role of an individual or a set of personal characteristics (Foldy, Goldman and Ospina 2008). To build networks and governance institutions that support civic capacity and the shared understandings and joint undertakings that comprise it, leaders can act in four corresponding domains:

1. To **shape the informal networks** that affect civic capacity, leaders can manage the scope of participation (Schattschneider 1960) by encouraging or discouraging actors to engage in debates and problem-solving efforts (Feldman and Khademian 2007). Approaches to managing the scope of participation range from broad outreach to all stake holders to selective inclusion of key participants (Fung 2006, Susskind and Cruikshank 1987). Decisions about whom to include or exclude from a network most consider each actor's interests, resources, views, and capacities for joint work (Klijn and Koppenjan 2006, O'Leary and Bingham 2007).

2. To **design and manage governance institutions** to address wicked problems, leaders must ensure the legitimacy of governance processes and structures. In consequence, leadership for civic capacity includes group facilitation, negotiation, mediation, and conflict resolution

(O'Leary and Bingham 2007). Leaders also engage in institutional design by altering allocations of costs and benefits, procedures for stake holder interactions and decision making, and the criteria participants use to assess joint efforts (Klijn and Koppenjan 2006).

3. To **influence stake holders' understandings** of problems, potential solutions, and expertise, leaders can nurture common interpretations of issues and events by framing or “sense-giving”. Frames inform how actors define problems and assess potential solutions (Rochefort and Cobb 1993). They derive from the language, images, and actions used to discuss issues (Lakoff 2004). Frames that invoke shared values or interests hold broad appeal and can increase shared understanding, while those that emphasize specific positions or program details may divide stake holders based on existing views of an issue (Fisher and Ury 1981, Bryson, Crosby and Stone 2006). Sense-giving leadership uses statements or actions to shape the way stake holders interpret data or events, define problems, and perceive themselves and one another (Foldy, Goldman and Ospina 2008, Klijn and Koppenjan 2006).

4. To **catalyze joint commitments** to address a problem, leaders mobilize resources or create new ones. Leaders mobilize resources through persuasion, reciprocity, or side payments. Persuasion uses logic to show that committing resources to address a problem benefits an actor (Conger 1998). Reciprocal deals elicit contributions to support specific initiatives in exchange for support for other initiatives that actors deem valuable (Axelrod 1984). When persuasion and reciprocity are infeasible, side payments can elicit cooperation from resistant stake holders – often those who stand to lose substantively from an initiative (C. N. Stone 2005). Leaders create resources by empowering actors to contribute to collective efforts. Empowerment consists of training to build skills or removing barriers that hinder participation in networks and governance institutions (Foldy, Goldman and Ospina 2008).

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1 summarizes the key dimensions and mechanisms of civic capacity, and depicts the relationships among them. As the paragraphs above indicate, the research on networks and collaborative governance is fairly well developed: Scholars have identified many of the factors that make networks and governance institutions effective. The ways the mechanisms affect each other, however, require further investigation, as do the leadership actions that shape networks, governance institutions, shared understandings, and joint commitments.

## **Research Design**

Borrowing from the concept of causal mechanisms in the social sciences (Hedstrom and Ylikoski 2010), I propose that networks, governance institutions, and leadership offer “strategic mechanisms” that enable (or constrain) the construction of civic capacity. Two recent cases from Seattle, Washington, compare the role of these mechanisms in partially “taming” a wicked problem (urban growth) with the obstacles to addressing a more intractable one (transportation infrastructure). A comparison of the two cases generates tentative findings about ways in which the strategic mechanisms interact to enable or hinder the taming of wicked problems.

The framework of strategic mechanisms for building civic capacity introduced above seeks to be both plausible and feasible, to inform the design of future research and the development of hypotheses. It aims for plausibility by demonstrating that its mechanisms are crucial to building civic capacity (Hedstrom and Ylikoski 2010). It aims for feasibility in the sense that the mechanisms are useful for practitioners who seek to build civic capacity, rather than simply being associated with the existence of civic capacity without necessarily contributing to its construction.

The article makes the case for the plausibility and feasibility of the mechanisms first by illustrating their contributions to the construction of civic capacity around urban growth in Seattle.

The mobilization of elite and grassroots stakeholders through city-wide and neighborhood discussions focused shared understandings and elicited joint commitments to address problems of growth. The article then examines the challenges of using the mechanisms to construct civic capacity to build transportation infrastructure, which has remained a more wicked problem than urban growth in Seattle. Holding the geographic setting constant enables a cross-case comparison to isolate the roles and interactions of networks, governance institutions, and leadership.

The data come from reviews of news media, available research, and interviews with a purposive sample of practitioners and experts in the two policy fields in Seattle. The cases demonstrate the strategic potential of the mechanisms for building civic capacity by fostering shared understandings of wicked problems and eliciting joint commitments to address them.

## **Building Civic Capacity for Urban Growth in Seattle**

Seattle in 1990 was a medium-sized city with a downtown business core based in services, some light and heavy industry scattered around the metropolitan region, and a number of neighborhoods that commanded fierce loyalty and community activism from their residents. Questions of growth became particularly pressing after growth opponents blocked the City's plan to redevelop downtown in the mid-1980s, and passed a ballot initiative in 1989 to limit the height and the number of new buildings downtown (Sirianni 2007). The state legislature forced the issue in 1990 by passing the Growth Management Act (GMA), which required all cities in Washington to design comprehensive plans to channel growth into specified "urban growth areas".

The framework presented above suggests that the challenge for leaders seeking to build civic capacity in this context was to assess the network relations and governance institutions affecting the debates about growth in Seattle, and to foster shared understandings and joint commitments.

Under simultaneous pressure from neighborhood residents and state policy, the Mayor, City Council, and two City Departments took halting and sometimes contradictory steps to do just that.

### **Network Relations**

When the GMA passed, beliefs about growth, definitions of the problem, and positions on solutions were sharply divided between two advocacy coalitions. Business interests and many elected officials favored growth to foster economic development. Leery of the volatile economic cycles created by the regional dominance of Boeing, with its reliance on large, episodic, high stakes purchase orders for aircraft, civic elites sought a broader economic base for more consistent growth. Growth, however, attracted new residents to the region, which increased housing prices, traffic congestion, and suburban sprawl. Concerns about these ills led neighborhood activists, some advocates for the poor, and a few elected officials to oppose further development and density. Owners of single family homes worried about the quality of life in residential neighborhoods and traffic congestion throughout the city, while advocates of social equity saw density and development as driving people with limited means out of the city (Fortier 1996).

The core members of the two advocacy coalitions commonly exchanged views in arcane debates about planning decisions, arguing matters of architectural design and zoning case-by-case. The remaining residents of Seattle held a general concern about growth, but found the technical nature of most land-use discussions impenetrable (Varley 1992). Other than the most vociferous advocates in the debate, ordinary citizens found both alternatives – growth or the status quo – unsatisfactory. As one resident put it, “We hate sprawl, but we hate density too” (Varley 1992, 5). Initially, then, network relations were hostile to reasoned exchanges, and the core members of the two advocacy coalitions dominated those exchanges; grassroots participation was limited.

### **Governance Institutions**

City officials first responded to the comprehensive plan requirement in the state GMA with a bureaucratic document outlining the City's zoning, land use, and development statutes. After neighborhood activists complained about the insular process and traditional content of this plan, the City launched a new, participatory planning process in 1994. The City Council created a Neighborhood Planning Program and a mayoral Office of Neighborhood Planning (Sirianni 2007). The Mayor and the City's Department of Planning and Development held a city-wide "summit" to develop a vision and values for neighborhood planning, followed by smaller discussions around the city to develop neighborhood plans to realize the vision. City staff provided legal and technical expertise to the participants in the summit and the neighborhood planning groups. The Mayor and professional facilitators led discussions at the summit, and City staff developed detailed handbooks and a "tool box" to support the neighborhood groups' organizing and planning. Among many suggestions, the handbooks encouraged the neighborhood groups to reach out broadly to include a variety of participants in their discussions, and to imagine what local residents who did not participate might want to see in the plans (Sirianni 2007).

The summit and the neighborhood planning groups moved debates about urban growth and development away from the specialized language of zoning, land use, and architecture – and the dominance of lawyers, planners, and other technical experts (Varley 1992). These new governance institutions empowered ordinary citizens to engage in deliberative discussions about the future of their city, as well as the key aspects of neighborhood design that would shape that future (Sirianni 2007). By expanding the scope of participation and creating new forums and clear ground rules to discuss critical issues, the new governance institutions altered the networks, interactions, and exchanges surrounding urban growth.

### **Shared Understandings**

To foster shared understandings among the participants in the new governance institutions, Mayor Rice and the staff of key City Departments were strategic about framing and sense-giving. In meetings with his staff and during the city-wide public summit, the Mayor put forth what he called a “public value proposition” with broad appeal to a range of interests (Rice 2008). It emphasized preserving Seattle’s “livability” while ensuring that the city continued to grow and anchor the surrounding region in order to expand opportunities for new residents (Varley 1992). The summit allowed participants to translate the Mayor’s proposition into a vision for the city’s future centered on the shared values of protecting communities, social equity, environmental stewardship, economic opportunity, and security. The subsequent neighborhood planning sessions enabled residents to design their own approaches to achieve that vision.

In speeches and other public appearances, the Mayor helped participants make sense of the planning process by reminding them of the vision motivating their efforts, and – as he put it – “telling them what he’d heard them say” (Rice 2008). The tool box and assistance that City staff provided to the neighborhood groups, meanwhile, de-mystified the planning process, clarified citizens’ roles in it, and signaled that the City welcomed residents’ ideas. These sense-giving actions helped residents focus on the purpose and principles of their work, and altered what counted as legitimate planning expertise (Sirianni 2007). They also nurtured a common view of the planning process as inclusive, participatory, and transparent, and built residents’ understanding of the vision and priorities informing the City’s Comprehensive Plan.

### **Joint Commitments**

The city-wide summit and neighborhood planning mobilized resources from the pro- and anti-growth advocacy coalitions, while creating new resources by empowering neighborhood participants. At first, these resources took the form of ideas about the future of the city; as the neighborhood plans took shape, those ideas turned into commitments to implement the plans.

Meanwhile, the Department of Planning and Development incorporated information from the city-wide summit and the neighborhood plans into a Comprehensive Plan that complied with the state GMA. The Comprehensive Plan channeled growth and development into “Urban Villages” in specific communities, while leaving others – including many neighborhoods of single family homes – as they were (Varley 1992). Every neighborhood agreed to absorb more density over time, and accepted long-run plans for more growth. Ultimately, the City implemented 80 per cent of the recommendations from the neighborhood plans (Office of City Auditor 2007).

Beyond the Comprehensive Plan, the planning process engendered voter support for bonds and taxes to rebuild libraries and create new community centers and parks across the city – many of which were neighborhood priorities. Relationships forged during the planning gave rise to new community groups, businesses, and organizations. In addition, the City created a Neighborhood Matching Fund, which gave small grants to groups that made financial or in-kind contributions to improve their neighborhoods. The Fund supported small projects throughout Seattle, including community gardens, associations, festivals, workshops, works of art, and play areas (Diers 2004).

In combination, then, acts of leadership by the Mayor, the City Council, the City Departments, and neighborhood residents formulated a vision for growth in Seattle that aligned with many citizens’ values. New governance institutions, along with framing and sense-giving by the Mayor and other City staff, opened up debates about growth and legitimized citizens’ ideas as valid complements to the expertise of land-use professionals. The Neighborhood Matching Fund and the designation of Urban Villages encouraged real estate investors, businesses, and neighborhood residents to undertake a variety of projects and initiatives that improved the quality of life and channeled growth into parts of the city that the Comprehensive Plan designated (Sirianni 2007).

The outcome has not been perfect, of course. Advocates are concerned that development and density in parts of Seattle have either priced out or crowded out families with children. The

growth in some Urban Villages has generated controversy about land-use and architectural decisions. Changes in subsequent mayors' priorities, budgets, and departmental leaders have diminished the capacity and the will of departmental staff to work with neighborhood residents (Sirianni 2007). In contrast to the contentious debates of two decades ago, though, most disputes now occur within – rather than about – the vision in the City's Comprehensive Plan.

### **Obstacles to Civic Capacity: Transportation Infrastructure**

Debates about transportation in Seattle over the past two decades have been at least as vexed as debates about urban growth once were, and remain quite contentious despite the opening of a light rail line and the start of construction on a downtown highway tunnel. Transportation has been an issue ever since the metropolitan region began to grow dramatically in the 1980s, which created problems of congestion and mobility beyond those of most comparable cities in the United States. Seattle's topography makes transportation infrastructure particularly problematic: The city is hilly and shaped like an hourglass, with large bodies of water on either side. An interstate and a six-lane state highway are the only high-speed thoroughfares linking the north and south ends of the city, while another interstate and a four-lane state highway cross bridges to the eastern suburbs across Lake Washington. Together, the city's bridges and hourglass shape severely limit the options for road and rail alignments to move people and freight.

Since the early 1990s, voters and elected officials in the Seattle region have debated whether and how to build rail transit and replace aging highways. Because four transportation mega-projects have commanded public attention and discussion in that time, this analysis examines the networks, governance institutions, and leadership actions related to:

1. the new light rail line that Sound Transit operates from downtown to the airport;

2. the Seattle Monorail Project (SMP), which planned a separate rail transit line serving other communities, but failed when revenue forecasts fell far short of projected costs;
3. the decade-long discussion about replacing State Route (SR) 99, a 60-year-old highway with a downtown viaduct that has been seismically unfit since a 2001 earthquake; and
4. the comparably long debate about replacing the Seattle portion of State Route (SR) 520, a 50-year-old highway that spans Lake Washington from the well-to-do Seattle neighborhood of Montlake out past the suburban campus of the Microsoft Corporation.

These mega-projects crystallize the challenges of building civic capacity to improve transportation in Seattle. Their combined impacts on commuting, freight mobility, traffic congestion, residential and commercial development, and climate change present high stakes for the future of the region.

### **Network Relations**

Seattle's recent transportation debates featured a variety of shifting alliances among actors that rarely cohered into an issue network. One advocacy coalition linked suburban commuters, freight companies, the Port of Seattle, and their elected representatives, who favored highway expansion to increase auto and freight mobility. They confronted environmental, neighborhood, and other grassroots factions who favored mass transit over highways and opposed the disruption of neighborhoods by construction and new roadways. Some of the factions simply preferred grassroots solutions – or none at all – to those devised by political elites. The factions allied on some issues (e.g., against highway construction), but split on others (e.g., over particular rail transit projects). On certain projects, such as Sound Transit's light rail line, some (but not all) of the interests in the first coalition joined some of the latter factions. Because cooperation was project-specific, temporary alliances rather than stable network relationships tended to result.

Efforts to manage the scope of participation surrounding each mega-project had a limited impact on network relations. Sound Transit, for example, used side payments to address

communities' complaints about the disruptions and inconveniences of light rail construction – which only encouraged complaints from additional groups. As the side payments mounted, so did the overall costs of the light rail line. The project ultimately had to be scaled back and re-engineered, while narrowly escaping outright defeat by a combination of fierce opposition and growing public skepticism about the project's merits and the agency's competence (Melroy 2010). The SMP, for its part, enjoyed support at the ballot box, but neglected to cultivate elected officials or downtown business interests to address controversies surrounding the alignment of the SMP line. In both instances, when each project faced political difficulties related to management and finances, its base of support was less broad and deep than its proponents had previously thought.

### **Governance Institutions**

The formal institutions that make decisions and manage mega-projects are as fragmented as the networks in the transportation field. The state Department of Transportation (WSDOT) is responsible for state roads and highways; within the City limits, it shares the management of state highways such as SR 99 and SR 520 with the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT). Light rail, commuter rail, and commuter buses into and out of Seattle are the purview of Sound Transit, a special-purpose government that spans the three-county metro region. A separate agency, King County Metro, operates the city buses in Seattle and some inner suburbs. In the SMP, voters created another special-purpose entity to design and operate a separate transit line. These agencies' narrow, disparate responsibilities hampered the design and management of the mega-projects as well as efforts to build support for them. On the most controversial projects (e.g., SR 99), officials in the same agency sometimes held competing positions (Brewster 2011).

Grassroots participation in Seattle's governance of transportation infrastructure occurred in two types of forums. The first was the ballot: SMP, Sound Transit, and the SR 99 replacement each faced multiple public votes – to fund studies, offer advisory opinions, approve revenues for design

and construction, and decide whether to complete troubled projects. These votes let citizens exercise their voices and created a veneer of public legitimacy, but only occasionally produced binding decisions. Most campaigns were heavy on sound bytes; reasoned deliberation, consistent frames, and sense-giving were rare and tended to reinforce existing, polarized views (Locke 2005). Many votes were so close that the losing side deemed them inconclusive; rather than concede, they promptly sought new votes or venues to promote or obstruct the projects at issue (Brewster 2011).

The second forum for participation in the mega-project debates consisted of public-involvement processes. Some of these were *pro forma* responses to federal requirements that the projects undergo environmental reviews, which privileged the specialized knowledge of project managers and experienced advocates, but rarely helped the public grapple with the projects' overall implications (Altshuler and Luberoff 2003). On occasion, though, public officials sought to foster more informed public deliberations. WSDOT, for example, created special stakeholders' committees to help design the new alignments for SRs 99 and 520. These temporary governance institutions used trained mediators to convene concerned actors to discuss project design. In the absence of broad framing or sense giving, though, the participants rarely considered the larger purposes and potential impacts of the projects. As the Committees deliberated, moreover, project managers, elected officials, and other elites conducted their own parallel debates about project designs in back rooms or in the media (Brewster 2011). Regardless of the work of the stakeholder committees, the parallel discussions undermined the legitimacy of the committees' decisions, and enabled disappointed parties to continue to press their cases in other venues.

### **Shared Understandings**

The repeated votes and multiple forums for debates did little to resolve the differences among partisans in the transportation debates, and increased the public's understanding of broader project purposes only marginally. The persistence of differences stemmed in part from the structural

difficulties of managing discussions about multiple, complex, high stakes infrastructure projects through diffuse networks and governance institutions. The dispersion of responsibilities and attenuated relationships in the field offered no central venue or civic intermediary to convene discussions about the overarching vision or purpose for transportation in the region.

In addition, the public statements of public officials and advocates rarely explored the larger questions at stake. Instead, they sought to build support or opposition for particular projects. Most discussions therefore focused on technical disputes about the specific features of projects (often their alignments or related community or environmental issues), without addressing the overall aims for transportation in the region (e.g., should the transportation system reduce traffic congestion? ...improve the mobility of people or goods? ...combat climate change?). SMP proponents, for example, failed to explain convincingly why the city needed a separate, elevated rail system when Sound Transit had already begun construction on a light rail line that would run underground and at-grade. Sound Transit's early champions, meanwhile, claimed that light rail would make Seattle a "world class city", but when faced with substantive concerns about the project's financing, desirability, or alignment simply urged "Build it!" (Melroy 2010).

The debates about SRs 99 and 520 also rarely discussed visions. The highway-replacement projects were a crucible for the tensions between Seattle's "urban greens", who sought to discourage auto use in order to combat climate change, and the advocates of highway expansion such as business interests, transportation department staff, and their allies. With occasional exceptions, the two sides neglected to articulate explicit futures for the region. While the greens held a strong vision, they failed to make a case for it beyond their own base. Instead, both sides argued over project details and used crafty tactics to advance their positions or undermine their opponents' (Brewster 2011). These tactics did little to help voters understand the different projects – much less the larger dilemmas and opportunities of transportation in the region.

## **Joint Commitments**

Seattle's transportation debates have mobilized elites and citizens for years. Project proponents and opponents have committed resources to ballot campaigns, public involvement processes, and other forms of advocacy. Governments have contributed millions of dollars for studies, mitigation, and design and construction. Sound Transit now operates light rail to the airport as well as commuter rail and buses, and voters have approved plans to expand light rail east and north of Seattle. Construction recently began on a downtown tunnel to replace the SR 99 viaduct, and discussions continue about the alignment of the Montlake portion of SR 520.

Despite this outpouring of effort and funds, key actors continue to oppose each project's design and allocation of public resources. Even the most advanced of the four mega-projects, Sound Transit's light rail line, remains a flashpoint for opposition as the agency works to expand service to the east side of Lake Washington. Under these circumstances, the ongoing mobilization of actors and resources around transportation in Seattle scarcely constitute joint commitments to address an issue of shared concern (as Stone defines civic capacity).

## **Discussion**

The foregoing case studies demonstrate the benefits of using the framework presented above to analyze efforts to build civic capacity. By examining network relations, governance institutions, and leadership actions, the cases provide plausible accounts of how civic capacity developed or faltered to address the wicked problems of urban growth and transportation in Seattle over the past two decades. The cases manifested a few similarities and a number of differences. Most of the similarities lay in the initial conditions surrounding the network relations, governance institutions, and wickedness of the problems of urban growth and transportation infrastructure. As the cases unfolded, key differences emerged in these same areas as well as in the actions of leaders. Those

differences engendered further differences between the cases in stake holders' shared understandings of the problems and joint commitments to address them.

### **Initial Similarities**

The problems in both cases were wicked. Stake holders' understandings of urban growth differed: Business groups and many other elites saw it bringing economic opportunity, while many neighborhood residents saw it destroying their quality of life. Understandings of transportation issues were also split, especially about the relative importance of auto use, neighborhood preservation, property values, and freight mobility.

Increasing the wickedness of both problems were divisions among stake holders about the appropriate expertise and standards to use to assess each problem and prospective solutions. Within the specialized languages and insular governance institutions that initially prevailed in both cases lay fundamental disagreements about how urban growth and transportation should be analyzed. Even when stake holders agreed on the same object of analysis, they argued over how to measure it. Transportation studies, for example, differed over whether to compare the capacity of new alignments for SR 99 in terms of the mobility of vehicles, people, or freight.

### **Initial Differences**

Key differences appeared in the level of network robustness and the fragmentation of governance; both were more challenging in the transportation case than the urban growth case. As a result, the cases differed in just how wicked the problems were.

Network relations in both cases were starkly divided among stake holders who held different problem definitions, but the urban growth debate featured a clear split between two advocacy coalitions. Despite the conflict between those coalitions, their internal coherence enabled exchanges of ideas and strategic coordination within each one. By comparison, not only were the

factions in the transportation field more fluid and less coordinated, but they sometimes fostered divisions among and within the governance institutions themselves.

The governance institutions in the two cases differed in that formal responsibility for addressing urban growth rested solely with the City, while responsibility for transportation was distributed across state, local, and special-purpose governments. In the urban growth case, therefore, City government was a central node in the issue network and a logical – though by no means necessary – convener of interested stake holders. The transportation field, by contrast, had no single actor with a broad role that encompassed all four of the mega-projects, thanks to the fragmented governance institutions in the region’s transportation field. With responsibility for different aspects of each mega-project distributed across a variety of institutional actors, the lead agencies for each one (WSDOT for SRs 99 and 520; Sound Transit for light rail; SMP for the ill-fated monorail) had to share their formal authority with other entities such as SDOT and private sector contractors.

### **Emergent Differences**

These initial differences made building civic capacity more challenging in the transportation field than in the urban growth case. The case studies nevertheless reveal differences in leadership actions in the two cases as well, which generated further differences in network relations, governance institutions, shared understandings, and joint commitments over time.

In the urban growth case, citizens’ objections to the City’s initial Comprehensive Plan prompted City officials to create new governance institutions (the city-wide summit and neighborhood planning) to design and implement the Comprehensive Plan. The City was a natural convener because it had formal jurisdiction over growth within City limits, and faced sanctions if its Comprehensive Plan failed to meet the standards in the state GMA. The City nevertheless was under no obligation to promote participatory planning or to serve as a civic intermediary

coordinating neighborhood planning, yet officials took pains to make governance inclusive, fair and transparent. In doing so, they lent a legitimacy to the resulting planning decisions that their initial insular approach to the Comprehensive Plan lacked.

In combination, the exclusive new governance institutions, the civic intermediary role, and the framing and sense-giving by City officials enabled joint learning among stake holders about the nature of the urban growth problem and possible solutions. The resulting policy innovations (e.g., Neighborhood Matching Fund projects, outreach and inclusion) derived from the City's efforts to harness citizens' expertise to meet the requirements in the state GMA.

In contrast, leaders in the transportation field often exploited – rather than redressed – the divisions in network relations, governance institutions, and shared understandings they encountered. Leadership actions in the transportation case differed in two key ways from those in the urban growth case. First, because the frames in which project proponents and opponents discussed transportation issues focused largely on project specifics, the stake holders and the public at large lost sight of the broader value and importance of a coordinated regional transportation system. Second, by debating each project in multiple forums at once in search of an advantage, proponents and opponents of the mega-projects fostered divisive interpretations of key issues and undermined the binding authority and legitimacy of whatever agreements they reached.

To be sure, incoherent networks and dispersed governance responsibilities left the transportation field without a natural convening entity that possessed a comprehensive view of all the mega-projects in the city. Despite occasional efforts, such as a Regional Transportation Commission that the state Governor and key legislators appointed to review major projects in the Seattle area, no civic intermediary developed to bridge the various mega-projects. While the networks, governance, and wickedness of the transportation problem certainly were hostile to efforts to build civic capacity, none of those conditions prevented the leadership actions and other

strategic mechanisms that emerged in the urban growth case. The hostile conditions may have discouraged collaborative approaches to transportation issues, but they did not prevent collaboration or dictate the more authoritative approaches that predominated.

### **Implications**

Though transportation clearly has been a more wicked problem than urban growth in Seattle in recent decades, citizens and elites ultimately worked together on urban growth, while the transportation stake holders remained at loggerheads. The case study of urban growth highlights leaders' efforts to frame the overarching importance of the issue, to create exclusive new governance institutions to structure discussion, and to help stake holders make sense of the process and outcomes of the debate. The dearth of comparable leadership actions and impacts on governance institutions, network relations, shared understandings, and joint commitments in the transportation case presents a stark contrast, regardless of the greater challenges posed by the problem of transportation.

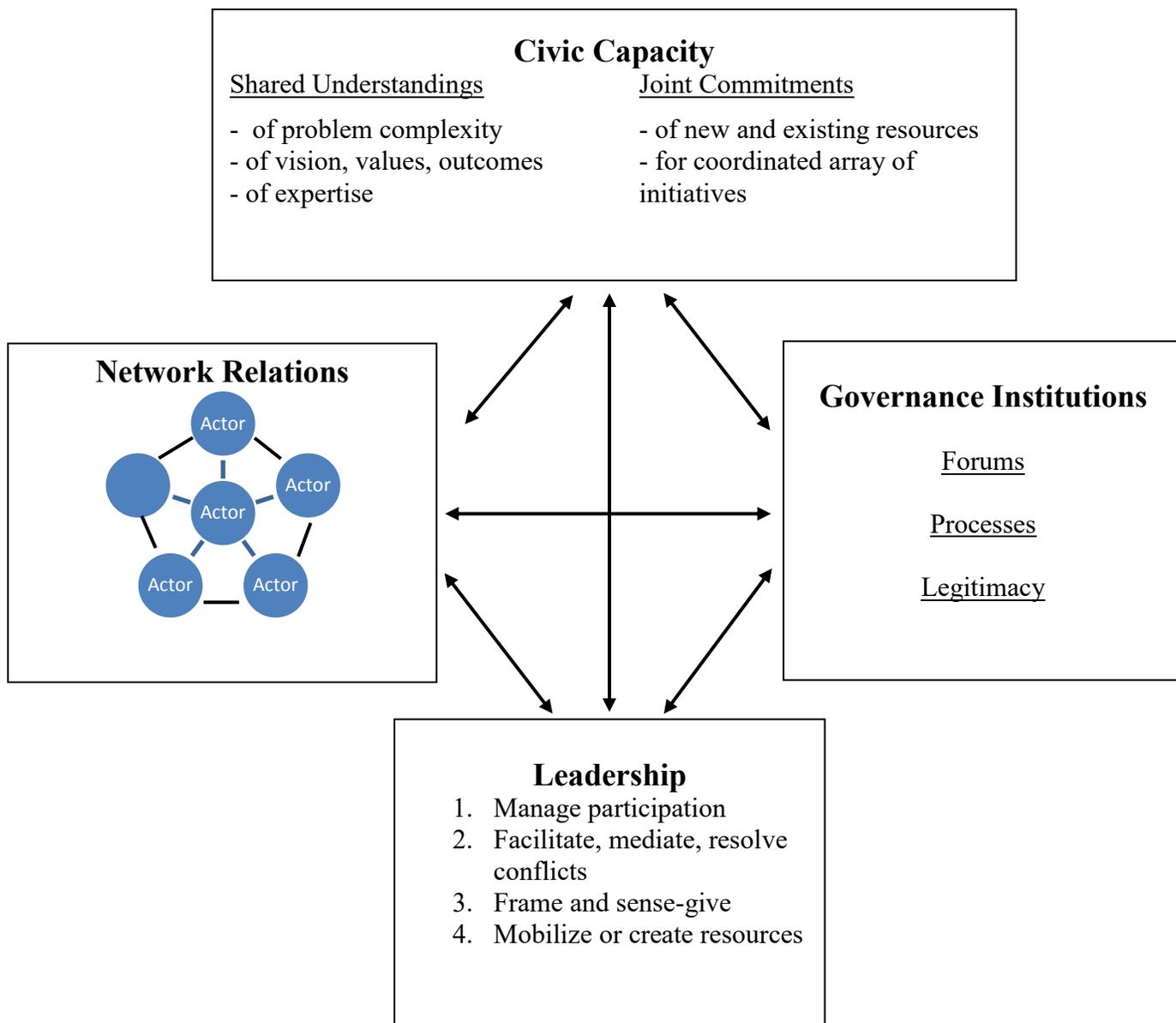
These cross-case differences suggest reasons for the “taming” of the urban growth problem and the continued wickedness of the transportation problem. In particular, five propositions about the influence of the strategic mechanisms on civic capacity emerge from this comparison. First, both diffuse networks and fragmented governance institutions increase the wickedness of a problem. Second, the more diffuse network relations are, the greater the obstacles to civic capacity. Third, the more fragmented governance institutions are, the greater the obstacles to civic capacity. Fourth, as the transportation case illustrates, authoritative leadership strategies may have limited impact on civic capacity when network relations and governance institutions are fragmented. Fifth, as the urban growth case illustrates, collaborative leadership strategies can create new governance institutions that can bridge some of the differences between opposing advocacy coalitions.

## **Conclusion: An Agenda for Research and Strategy**

The cases of urban growth and transportation infrastructure in Seattle echo the findings from other studies about the challenges of building civic capacity. In combination, though, they also highlight opportunities by demonstrating ways that leaders can shape network relations and governance institutions to foster shared understandings and joint commitments to address wicked problems. They call particular attention to the practical benefits of building robust networks and legitimate, transparent governance institutions. Figure 1 summarizes these critical considerations.

Future research might refine the specific workings of the mechanisms and test the relationships among them. Scholars could develop measures of the mechanisms to hone their analytic precision and the theoretic logic connecting them. Those measures could then undergird more systematic comparisons of efforts to build civic capacity to address different kinds of wicked problems in the same city (e.g., transportation, education, sustainable growth, etc.). Studies could also examine attempts to build civic capacity in cities that vary on key dimensions of each mechanism. The latter approach could compare efforts to tame a single wicked problem in cities with arrays of governance institutions that range from legitimate and coordinated, network relations that range from robust to diffuse, and leaders who use different approaches to manage participation, navigate conflicts, frame and sense-give, and mobilize and create resources. In combination, these approaches to research could help generate strategic advice for leaders about how to build civic capacity under different conditions.

**Figure 1: A Framework for Building Civic Capacity**



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