



Helping Set a World Record in Greensboro

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Yesterday evening I participated in an interesting event in Greensboro. It was sponsored by [Action Greensboro](#), a nonprofit organization underwritten by eight local foundations to advance their city.

They have created a speaker series called "Getting Things Done in Greensboro," and last night's session was "How Citizens and Local Government Can Work Together." I was one of three panel members who responded to a moderator's questions for about an hour, and then we answered written questions from the audience, emails from people watching a live video stream, and "tweets" from people via Twitter (a first for me). The other panelists were Harry Jones (Mecklenburg County Manager) and John Alexander (formerly with the Center for Creative Leadership). Ruth DeHoog with the Political Science Department at UNC-Greensboro was the moderator.

There is growing concern in Greensboro and Guilford County that their local elected officials are not focused enough on planning for the future, and that they are not working effectively with one another or with their professional managers. There is special concern that their elected officials do not fully appreciate the relationship between their responsibilities and those of the manager. Guilford County has fired four or five managers in the last five years, and Greensboro recently fired their manager in a way that has caused some people to worry that they will follow the county's pattern (especially since three former county commissioners have been elected to the city council).

Last night over 200 private citizens turned out largely to hear about the council-manager form of government, which must be some kind of record. I'm tempted to call the Guinness Book of World Records. What does the effective practice of the council-manager form of government look like? Who should articulate the long-term needs of the city or county, and how can citizens hold them accountable? What is the appropriate role of the professional staff in innovation, long-term strategic thinking, and advising elected officials? How can elected officials adequately represent diverse constituencies in their large jurisdictions and still make decisions for the community as a whole? A number of elected officials were present and a couple commented at the end of the session.

The turnout and level of interest was impressive, and it will be interesting to see whether the local elected officials think any differently about their roles and responsibilities. Panel sessions tend toward more superficial answers, and so it is hard to know if you are saying anything worthwhile. I shamelessly promoted several of our programs aimed at helping elected officials understand their



roles and improve their effectiveness. The session made me wonder if we have a greater role to play in communities where a governing board is dysfunctional and they are not working effectively with the manager. Hard to imagine many board members (or at least the right ones) volunteering for a workshop on dysfunctional boards. Could we offer an advanced workshop for managers on working with challenging boards that would not require them to label their own board as dysfunctional? Some of these difficult board dynamics are inevitable and voters always can administer the ultimate corrective, but I still wonder whether and how we might do more. (Special thanks to David Ammons for helping me prepare for the session.)