

Forums on the Fourth

A unique application of National Issues Forums on the Fourth of July

A REPORT by Tim Grove

Primary Research Question:

What would happen if you combined the annual celebration of our nation's independence with the most foundational practice of a vital democracy? That was the primary research question behind the University of Kentucky (U of K) Public Policy Institute's (PPI) creation and implementation of "Forums on the Fourth (FOF)."

Forums on the Fourth was conceived by the U of K PPI faculty in collaboration with National Issues Forums Institute. It is a way for graduates of U of K's PPI to implement deliberative forums in their communities following their participation in the PPI. July 4, 2002, was the inaugural date for Forums on the Fourth but FOF will be repeated for several more years following the U of K PPI, which is scheduled for spring 2003 this year.

A Summons to Citizen Action

Forums on the Fourth combines the celebration of our nation's independence on July 4 with an essential citizen responsibility, which is to deliberate with other citizens and make choices together about our common problems. FOF intentionally places the practice of deliberative forums on the anniversary of our nation's independence in hopes of reawakening citizens to their sense of duty to be political actors not spectators. FOF is a summons to citizens to use the holiday not for mere recreation and leisure but for the practice of democracy's most foundational action – public deliberation. FOF hopes to remind citizens of their essential role in public policy making.

In the early days of our democracy, citizens gathered in a public place to talk together and learn together about their common problems before deciding how to solve them. Today, citizens still have a duty to gather and discover their "public voice" on urgent issues of concern.

Our democracy is a work in progress. If American democracy is going to fulfill its promise, citizens must take responsibility and act together. They can act directly or through their representatives but they must act. Sound choices come from our most reflective and shared judgments, not from the first reactions so often documented by pollsters.

Forums on the Fourth utilizes key principles of deliberative democracy – talking, listening, learning about various approaches to a problem and the costs and

consequences associated with them – before leaping headlong into solutions. Research and experience show that citizens are better equipped to decide together on an approach that will serve the common good after deliberating a while.

Although FOF was originally designed as a way for U of K PPI graduates to gather citizens and try out their moderating skills, any PPI, library, educational institution, community organization or church can participate. July 4, 2002 was the inaugural year for FOF. But on the strength of what the U of K PPI learned in its first attempt, it will surely offer FOF to 2003 PPI graduates as a way for them to “field test” their skills as moderators while also reconnecting their communities to an age-old practice of democracy. A FOF promotion kit has been prepared for this year’s PPI graduates. The U of K PPI has tentatively been scheduled for spring 2003 at Flaget Center, 1935 Lewiston Drive, Louisville, Kentucky.

What Three Communities Learned

Three communities – Carbondale/Murphysboro, Illinois, Columbia, Kentucky and Shepherdsville, Kentucky – each formed committees to boldly plan Forums on the Fourth (FOF) in its inaugural year. Carbondale/Murphysboro and Columbia actually succeeded in convening a forum on July 4. Family illness prevented committee members in Shepherdsville from following through with their plans to convene a forum on July 4. But even in Shepherdsville, lessons were learned that might benefit future FOF efforts.

The **Jackson County (Illinois) Issue Forum** hosted FOF at the Catholic Newman Center on the Southern Illinois University campus. Geographically, Jackson County encompasses Murphysboro, Carbondale and SIU. Within this county, at least nine organizations joined forces to sponsor FOF. They included:

- ◆ Carbondale Community Education Association
- ◆ University of Illinois Extension
- ◆ Department of Foreign Languages at SIU
- ◆ The Center for Independent Living
- ◆ Dislocated Workers Program – Lake Land College
- ◆ St. Andrews Catholic Church, Murphysboro
- ◆ Southern Illinois Learning in Retirement Curriculum Committee
- ◆ The Catholic Newman Center
- ◆ The Carbondale Times Newspaper
- ◆ The Southern Illinoisan

Key people who led the organizing effort in Jackson County were Frank Sehnert, a graduate of two public policy institutes (including the UK PPI), Bonnie Vaughn, David Bobell, Odessa Meeks and Sarah Heyer. Bonnie, David, and Odessa also are graduates of the U of K PPI in Burlington.

The Jackson County Issues Forums group learned an enduring truth about convening a forum: there is strength in numbers. When several organizations unite to convene a forum, they attract participants from a wider constituency. As a result, 30 persons participated in the FOF at the Neuman Center. They deliberated on "terrorism." National Issues Forums booklets on terrorism were distributed in advance by staff at the University of Illinois extension office. Approximately half of the participants obtained and read the book in advance.

The Columbia Rotary Club hosted FOF at the Columbia-Adair County Training & Development Center. Although Rotary's membership is comprised of men and women from various businesses, civic organizations and churches, Rotary was the lone sponsor of FOF this year. Still, six persons gathered to deliberate on the topic of "environmental protection."

In Shepherdsville, a planning team led by Randy Matlow, another 2001 UK PPI graduate, was preparing to convene a forum on "terrorism" on July 4. However, family illness prevented the team from following through with its plan. Nonetheless, the Shepherdsville team found many community supports for the idea of FOF. For instance, the Public Library was scheduled to provide space for the forum, the local newspaper was ready to promote it with a news story and the county judge executive was prepared to issue a proclamation on FOF. Also, a local McDonalds restaurant was ready to supply the all-important hot breakfast.

Start with a Hot Breakfast

Getting citizens in most communities to rise early on a holiday and commit three hours to an intense conversation on an urgent national issue would take some wooing, FOF planners imagined. Offering citizens a complimentary hot breakfast seemed like an enticing gesture of hospitality that might attract. Citizens who showed up for forums at the Catholic Newman Center in Carbondale, Illinois and the Columbia-Adair County Training & Development Center in Columbia, Kentucky certainly were not disappointed.

The featured item on the menu at the Newman Center was a frittata prepared by Sarah Heyer. The frittata and some additional side items seemed to satisfy everyone. In Columbia, Dr. Greg Phelps cajoled Rotary Club members to pitch in two breakfast casseroles, a selection of breads, fresh fruit with yogurt topping, coffee and juice, which provided hearty sustenance for a morning of deliberation. If FOF had been convened in Shepherdsville, McDonalds would have been ready with Egg McMuffins, hash browns and orange juice.

Selecting the Topic for Deliberation

In Carbondale and Shepherdsville, the NIF issue booklet entitled "Terrorism: What Do We Do Now?" was the obvious choice for deliberation following the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. In Columbia, Greg Phelps selected the topic "environmental protection" because it dovetailed with one of the Rotary's ongoing projects – trying to clean up Adair County.

"If I were to do it over again...I would have begun by having a session...to talk about the problem that they [Rotary, community] wanted to address instead of, in effect, mandating the topic for people," Greg said.

Promotional strategies varied

Frank Sehnert, organizer, and co-moderator for the forums, and chairman of the Carbondale Community Education Association, encouraged fellow citizens to attend the forum through promotional fliers and newspaper articles. "Before the fireworks start, attend the Forum," he said. "Help our citizens reconnect with the political process through looking at public policy issues and searching for ways of acting together to solve those issues."

Three newspapers -- [The Southern Illinoisan](#), *The Carbondale Times*, and the Southern Illinois University's *Daily Egyptian* -- provided news coverage of the forum, both in advance and after the forum took place.

In addition to Frank Sehnert, Coordinator of the Jackson County Issues Forums Planning Committee, others who helped to organize, moderate, or report on the forum include:

- ◆ David Bobell, Unit Lead, University of Illinois Extension
- ◆ Sarah Heyer, Russian Instructor, Department of Foreign Languages Southern Illinois University, Carbondale
- ◆ Bonnie Vaughn, Executive Director, Center for Independent Living
- ◆ Brenda Crimmins, Educational Coordinator, Dislocated Workers Program, Lake Land College, Mattoon,
- ◆ Father Gary Gummersheimer, St. Andrews Catholic Church, Murphysboro
- ◆ Professor Marvin Kleinau, member of the Southern Illinois Learning in Retirement Curriculum Committee
- ◆ John Scarano, director of the Neuman Student Center, SIU

In Columbia, Kentucky, the Rotary Club displayed FOF promotional posters around the Town Square. The club also announced FOF during its annual radio auction for Lindsey Wilson College. The Adair County Progress sent a photographer to cover the forum. The Progress published a photograph of the forum with a cutline describing Forums on the Fourth as "an exercise in

participatory democracy." A more substantive story on Columbia's FOF appeared on the Lindsey Wilson College Web site.

Deliberation was spirited

Convenors of FOF in Carbondale and Columbia reported that participants were energized by the deliberation.

"At first we thought we would attract the attention of perhaps 10 to 12 people," said Frank Sehnert, a moderator in Carbondale. "So, we were surprised to have more than 30 attend the breakfast and forum. Everything went smoothly and on schedule. We made it through all three approaches although participants felt that they wanted more time to deliberate on each approach, as well as consider others."

In Carbondale, the 30 forum participants split into two groups that deliberated concurrently on the three approaches.

"In general, Dave and Betsy were very hands-off in their facilitation," said Sarah Heyer. "It's tricky – the stricter the facilitation, the more the facilitator should have clear principles to follow and the group should be aware of those principles.

"There were plenty of people who were not participating," she said. "A smaller group might have made a difference."

Dave, Bonnie, Frank, and Sarah met following the forum and evaluated the session. Here are some of their thoughts:

- ◆ Divide the large group into small groups (possible three or four persons) to enhance participation -- at least in the beginning of the forum.
- ◆ Clarify ideas as they are presented
- ◆ Allow more time for deliberation; more ideas might have come up.
- ◆ One small group went off on tangents too often; more "hands-on" moderating might have prevented this from happening.
- ◆ It was stimulating to hear voices/perspectives that are not usually heard.
- ◆ There was no one under 40 in the group -- next time, get some students.
- ◆ This topic could be the basis for a series of discussions (like study circles).

In Columbia, Greg Phelps learned several lessons that would be valuable for next year's convening of FOF.

- ◆ Include more people/organizations in the planning.
- ◆ Include more people/organizations in the selection of the issue for deliberation

- ◆ Encourage community leaders to put FOF on their calendars and keep their commitment to participate.
- ◆ The core group of planners are looking at this as an annual event but also doing other forums throughout the year as well, including one on the Fourth of July.
- ◆ Each member of the core group of participants committed to invite at least one person to next year's FOF event.
- ◆ The deliberative process is powerful. Every forum is unique. People who participate in forums take ownership of them.

Additional Comments

From Greg Phelps, Columbia, Ky.: "Forums on the Fourth is a good habit to form. The Fourth of July is a celebration of our nation's independence and it seems to me that we could do more substantive things to celebrate that event than going out to the lake or watching fireworks. The idea of getting people to participate in deliberative democracy touches the core of what that holiday is all about. The problem is...people have come to associate July 4th with just having time off to do things with their families, to go to sales or whatever. So we have perverted the holiday in the same way we have perverted the holidays like Christmas and Easter, by removing the substance from them and accommodating them to a commercialized culture.

"I have been concerned for a long time with the disengagement of college students from the political process. I have searched around for different ways to address that problem. I stumbled across NIF in the summer of 2001. I said, this is just exactly what I have been looking for. The Kentucky PPI was my real entry into this activity.

"A seed has been planted in our local community so we can take the six or so people who were active in our forum and maybe next year, we get 12."

From Frank Sehnert, Carbondale, Illinois: "It has been a gratifying experience working with John Cavanaugh, Connie Wheeler, and Tim Grove. It is amazing how all the pieces finally came together and the team believes it is only the beginning."

Promotion Kit

- ◆ Four-color, tri-fold brochure (Available from Connee Wheeler at University of Kentucky; e-mail Connee at cwheeler@uky.edu)
- ◆ Four-color, Forums on the Fourth Poster (Available from Connee Wheeler at University of Kentucky; e-mail Connee at cwheeler@uky.edu)
- ◆ Press Release (see attachments)
- ◆ Proclamation

News Release on **Forums on the Fourth**

Citizens in (name of your community/communities) are invited to a unique celebration of our nation's independence on the morning of the Fourth of July.

It's called "Forums on the Fourth."

"'Forums on the Fourth' will give citizens an experience of one of our nation's earliest and truest expressions of democracy – the 'town meeting'," said (first and last name, a local organizer.) "In the 17th century, citizens gathered in a public place to talk, listen and learn together about urgent issues our nation and local communities were facing in hopes of finding workable solutions.

"'Forums on the Fourth' achieves those same outcomes in our modern era and helps citizens reconnect with the political process. Forums on the Fourth has the potential of restoring the vitality of our young democracy by helping citizens rediscover their public voice," said (last name of local organizer).

Forums on the Fourth, which is co-sponsored by (list all local sponsors), will begin with a hot breakfast buffet at 8:45 a.m. at the (facility or building and address). The breakfast is compliments of (list all organizations).

"Believe me, the breakfast will be worth getting out of bed early," said (last name of same organizer quoted above). The forums will begin promptly at 9:30 a.m. Participants will have their choice of deliberating on one of two issues: 1) (issue #1) or 2) (issue #2). Discussion materials will be provided. The deliberations will end at 11:30 a.m.

"You will be home by noon leaving plenty of time for boating, picnics and other recreational activities," said (last name of organizer).

This is the inaugural year for "Forums on the Fourth," which is the creation of the University of Kentucky Public Policy Institute (PPI) in cooperation with Kettering Foundation, which conducts research on how communities and democracy might work better.

(Name of your community) is among several communities in the U.S. that are sponsoring Forums on the Fourth. Others include (check NIF Website "News" for names of other communities).

There is no fee to participate in Forums on the Fourth. To register, contact (organizer's name) at (telephone).

Proclamation About Forums on the Fourth

***"Forum on the Fourth"
Proclamation***

WHEREAS, democracy is the foundation of our society.

WHEREAS, in order for democracy to flourish, citizens must be able to gather periodically to exchange ideas, share information and make choices together about issues of local or national concern.

WHEREAS, National Issues Forums is a resource that names and frames issues in ways that allow citizens from all walks of life and all parts of town to understand them.

WHEREAS, National Issues Forums is also a process that allows citizens to deliberate -- exchange ideas, share information and make choices together on complex issues, much like those we face in (name of your community or county)

WHEREAS, the Fourth of July is a day when our nation celebrates its independence.

WHEREAS, the Fourth of July is also a day to recognize that with freedom comes responsibility, particularly that each citizen in this young democracy should learn how to exercise his or her public voice.

WHEREAS, "Forums on the Fourth" is a thoughtful way for citizens in (name of your community) can celebrate our nation's independence while also learning how to exercise their public voice.

WHEREAS, "Forums on the Fourth" uses National Issues Forums booklets and process and encourages (name of your community) citizens to gather for a delicious, fortifying breakfast on the morning of July 4, and enter into spirited deliberation on issues of local and national concern.

**THEREFORE, be it resolved that
(your community's name and state)
proclaims July 4, (add current year) as "Forums on the Fourth Day" in honor of those citizens participating in deliberative forums on the topics (or topic) of (list topics) from (list beginning time to ending time) at (list name of host site, address, city, state)**

