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They Sold Our Park! How Local Governments Fail at Democracy

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Essay completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Global Honors,
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In 2016, Kristy Herrick of Kent, Washington was shocked to learn that her local 10-acre city park had been sold to a developer (Westneat, 2016a). Making matters worse, and despite living next to the park, she had no idea it was even for sale. It turned out that even though Pine Tree Park (PTP) had been for sale for two years, no one outside of the Kent city government or the buyer could have realistically known about the sale. Furthermore, city workers did not post the land-use development sign in the park until three months after the city council approved the sale (Kent Parks and Recreation Commission [PRC], 2016c). The entire process of selling the park to a housing developer had been in the works for more than ten years, and yet, no one thought to ask the residents about it. You may be wondering, just as Herrick was, how the sale of a public park could not only occur but also go unnoticed. And more importantly, why should anyone living outside of Kent care about what seems to be a localized case of bad governance?

By critically examining the details of the PTP sale through Kent's public documents and local newspaper articles, I found that city leaders' ideology surrounding economic vitality and their technocratic-based decision making, combined with inadequate citizen participation, led to the sale of PTP. Moreover, these issues are not unique to Kent but are part of a larger global trend of democratic decline, which at one extreme leads toward autocracies (Lührmann et al., 2018). This paper aims not only to show how the secret sale of one city's park is a symptom of larger issues of democracy but also to explore potential solutions which can strengthen democracy.

There is no shortage of research surrounding the theory of a "global 'democratic recession'" (Wike, Simmons, Stokes, & Fetterolf, 2017; Mounk & Foa, 2018; Lührmann et al., 2018). Inglehart (2018) proclaims, "the world is experiencing the most severe democratic setback since the rise of fascism in the 1930s." Mair (2006) is struck by the universality among

36 advanced democracies of a trend in which people are participating less in politics and political parties are less able to engage citizens (p. 33). The most recent annual *Freedom in the World* report states that political rights and civil liberties worldwide have declined for the past 13 years regardless of government type (Freedom House, 2019, p. 4). Even those who doubt the theory of declining democracy, like Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), believe current developments such as the U.S. election of a president lacking democratic values could push democracy backwards globally (pp. 204-206). Overall, these reports and theories paint a bleak picture of democracy at the national level.

There are others, though, who suggest local level politics can reverse this trend while also working toward solving other global issues (Levine, 2013; Green, 2013). According to Green (2013), those who believe global issues can be solved locally, or glocalists, “say, we should stop expecting big, centralized governments to solve the world's problems and start looking to cities for innovative solutions.” This may not be a tenable approach for some large-scale problems, such as global warming (Steinberg, 2015). As for democracy, though, Teune (1995) believes “If democracy is to take root in the long run, then democratic political developments will have to occur at the local level” (p. 23). With this in mind, one must first consider the aspects of local government which indicate and support the theory of declining democracy before proposing potential solutions. This paper does that by considering Kent’s PTP sale.

This paper begins with a brief explanation of how Kent’s PTP sale happened. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of three main issues undermining democracy in Kent and their connection to related global issues. The first issue involves the impact of economic interests on democracy. The second considers technocratic decision-making and elected officials’ reliance on technical experts. The third is a discussion of declining civic engagement. The final section

provides potential solutions, as well as their feasibility for Kent. The goal is to not only show that the issues of urban economic development ideologies, technocratic decision making, and inadequate citizen participation are happening in Kent and in many cities and towns around the world, but also that there are ways to create a more democratic future. The issues facing Kent are universal obstacles to democratic local governance.

The city of Kent, Washington is a southern Seattle suburb of 128,000 residents located within King County (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Kent is the 10th most diverse city in the U.S. with more than 130 languages spoken (McCann, 2019; Kent School District, 2018). The city government consists of an elected mayor and seven council members elected at-large for four year terms. There are no term limits (Kent Ordinance No. 3595).

In late 2005, ten years after annexing PTP from King County, the Kent city council voted to sell the park (Kent Ordinance No. 3241, 1995; PRC, 2016c, p. 1). Finding the specific details of the PTP sale in public records of the time is difficult. While the 2016 “Pine Tree Park Timeline and After Action Review” (PRC, 2016c) is a valuable tool, it does not provide links to specific documents nor accurately convey how inaccessible the mentions of this sale were to the average citizen (see Appendix A for a detailed timeline). In fact, neighbors did not find out about the sale until they happened to see a public notice sign posted in the park in December 2015, three months after the council approved the sale and eleven years after the city started working on the sale (PRC, 2016c).

The events show that Kent’s elected officials were less than transparent about selling PTP. In fact, after the sale, they admitted, “The city had assumed that a public process to sell PTP was unnecessary because the city had recently sold other parks and recreation property without public processes and because PTP was undeveloped, not centrally located, and difficult

to access by vehicle”ⁱ (PRC, 2016c, p. 12). Zimmermann (2007) makes the argument that bad public land management practices, like a “resistance to transparent procedures ... directly undermines the public’s trust in the ruling government and governance processes – a factor essential for good governance” (p.32). So, why did elected officials “assume” it was acceptable to sell a public park, even if it was out of the way, to a housing developer without consulting the public?

The Role of Economic Interests in Cities

To answer that question, one can look at both Kent’s recent development history and at the government/business relationship in any capitalist society. In both cases the answer is that economic interests have a stronghold in local government mostly because city leaders believe in the ideology of economic vitality. This is nothing new nor is it unique to Kent. In fact, according to Lindblom (1977, p. 170), favoring business is prevalent in any private enterprise market-oriented society, i.e. most of the world. There is a pervasive idea that cities must grow and that growth means adding businesses to attract more people to live in the city which then generates more revenues for the city. In 1993, one Kent councilmember summed up this idea perfectly when referring to Kent’s downtown economic vitality plan, "either you grow or you die. We're just trying to figure out the best way to grow" (Wurzer & Leovy, 1993). There is also an aspect of competition in this sentiment; if a city cannot attract business there is the belief that the businesses will move to other cities that can offer them better incentives.

This economic vitality ideology means cities cater to business interests and this gives the business community an advantage over citizens. Peters and Pierre (2012) argue, “As a key societal player in most cities, the business sector has the capacity, through action or inaction, to determine much of the outcome of the city's policies” (p. 8). Developers can decide where to

build based on the best financial incentives. And “even though corporate leaders cannot simply dictate to City Hall, business interests occupy a special place in the local arena” (Ross & Levine, 2012, p. 80) because city officials hold on to the ideology that they must be economically viable above all else. This unspoken power, according to Lindblom (1977), means business leaders are more than an interest group (p. 172). For him, business executives “appear as functionaries performing functions that government officials regard as indispensable” (Lindblom, 1977, p. 175), giving business a “privileged role in government” (p. 172). Or as another political theorist simply states, “economic power is political power” (Arblaster, 1987, p. 102).

This notion that growth is key has given Kent a history of putting development above social and environmental concerns. To take one key example, part of Kent’s downtown revitalization project of the 1990s included city leaders actively pursuing a regional justice center being built in Kent, “hoping the center will be a business magnet, employing hundreds, filling nearby offices and luring new restaurants into downtown Kent” (Leovy, 1992; “City makes the first offer,” 1991). The 931 bed jail and court facility was built in Kent, as neighbors feared, “next to the Kent Commons - the city's recreation center - and across the street from ball fields where children play” (Leovy, 1992). In fact, there were two playfields next to the jail, Commons Playfields and Borden Playfields. The *Seattle Times* even named Borden Playfields as one of their “perfect places for summer picnics” (“South end parks,” 1995).

The city solved the problem of having children playing near the jail by eliminating the fields. In 2005, the city sold Borden Playfields and its adjacent property to a developer. The land south of the playfields was previously a chemical plant which “the city spent \$16 million to buy and clean up 20 acres” (Boyer, 2005). At the time, city leaders said they “expect their investment to pay off from the enhanced tax base” (Boyer, 2005). Then, the Commons Playfields on the

north side of the jail was also removed in 2007 to build a \$84.5 million events arena (Hunter, 2008; Hunter, 2009). At the time, people were upset at the loss of land. In fact, in 2009, at a public meeting, people were asking “when the city planned to replace the soccer fields lost with the closure of the Commons Playfields two years ago to make room for the ShoWare Center” (Hunter, 2009).

It was clear from these examples that the council’s main concern was the economic vitality. In fact, this idea has persisted throughout mayoral and council member changes and despite the public backlash. In 2017, one year after the PTP sale, the Kent City Council voted to sell Kent’s public par-3 golf course to an apartment and retail developer (Hunter, 2017a). There was brief talk from two councilmembers to try to preserve the grounds for a park, but the five other councilmembers dismissed that idea. The council president said “he would have voted to sell the property to a developer even if there had been a formal proposal to keep the land in its natural habitat with possibly a couple of ball fields” (Hunter, 2017a). Furthermore, the Mayor was concerned about the city’s relationship with developers, saying the sale, “would really damage the city’s reputation with quality developers to in the last minute change course” (Hunter, 2017a). Parks are clearly not a priority of the top officials in Kent.

Why is development so crucial to cities and why are they so willing to readily accept developers’ plans? Because, elected officials are worried that that potential revenue could go to competing cities (Kantor & Turok, 2012, p. 474). According to Kantor and Turok (2012), “The city seeks to build a reputation for being business-friendly through its speedy decision-making and undemanding requirements on issues such as the environment, social responsibility, and contributions to infrastructure costs” (p. 478). This certainly happened in the golf course sale; the council did not want to take the time to discuss possible alternatives (Hunter, 2017a). Not to

mention the \$16 million the city spent to clean up a hazardous waste site only to turn around to sell it with hopes of recouping the money from “the enhanced tax base” (Boyer, 2005). Most significantly, the city was willing to sell PTP to a housing developer and complete all the necessary land zoning changes without openly requesting public input.

To be fair, Kent’s business community does not always have a stranglehold on government policies. In 2017, the council increased the business square footage tax to help pay for parks, and then in 2018, they increased B&O taxes, again, to help pay for parks (Hunter, 2017b, 2018)ⁱⁱ. The Mayor seemed to understand the necessity for a healthy balance of business and social concerns, stating “without taking care of the community – providing public safety and programs – we have no community for business to operate in” (Hunter, 2018). After the 2018 vote to increase B&O tax rates, the council president expressed to Kent’s Chamber of Commerce a hope to “bridge the relationship to work on the same page and on the same team” (Hunter, 2018). It is clear that the council wanted to maintain their “good for business” standing, despite the tax increases (Ross & Levine, 2012, p. 80).

Technocratic Decision-Making

Another issue beyond an economic development mindset is the reliance on experts for scientific, rational solutions when making policy decisions. In its purest form, “technocracy ... refers to a system of governance in which technically trained experts rule by virtue of their specialized knowledge and position in dominant political and economic institutions” (Fischer, 1990, p. 17).ⁱⁱⁱ This type of governance, Fischer (1990) explains, is not always obvious; it can happen less recognizably behind the scenes when elected officials rely on administrators and consultants for policy decisions (pp. 19-21).

Some theorists believe this reliance on technical answers to policy decisions is detrimental to democracy. Dickson and Noble (1981) argue that it is an “attack on democracy in the name of ‘efficiency,’ ‘manageability,’ ‘governability,’ ‘rationality’ and ‘competence’ (p. 4). Fischer (1990) agrees, stating that some believe things like political bargaining and compromising are a “nightmare of irrationality” (p. 22). Technocrats feel there is a standard, correct answer for governmental problems.

But social issues are complicated and there are not always technical solutions. People value things like quality of life that cannot be measured with a cost-benefit analysis (Levine, 2013, pp. 64-70). Furthermore, Levine (2013) argues, the people who live and experience the community have a better understanding of the issues that impact them. That said, Putnam’s (2000) reviews of technocratic theory revealed that “the technocrat typically lacks sympathy for popular participation in government and shows contempt for the average citizen” (p. 398). Democratic endeavors, like dealing with the public’s perceptions and feelings, may seem irrational. And deliberation may be considered too time-consuming, making government less efficient; all of which go against traditional technical thinking that is pervasive in Western culture (Fischer, 1990, pp. 59-60).

That said, certain situations may require expertise. In 2011, both Italy and Greece elected financial experts to head their governments in hopes of fixing their respective economic crises (“Who, What, Why,” 2011). Majone believed “experts were better able to deal with the technical complexities of modern law-making, which often confused elected politicians” (as cited in Mair, 2006, p. 27). So, in some instances of complete economic failure and in legal issues which require advanced knowledge of the law and economic policies, technocrats may be the best people to sort out those complex problems.

Experts are essential in those contexts, but in the affairs of a democratic local government, determining policies that impact people's daily lives, elected officials should not rely solely on the experts' opinions. Instead, experts should present information and analyze various possible courses of action as objectively as possible. Levine (2013) argues the goal is not to dismiss experts but to "recognize the value of genuine collaborations that involve experts" (p. 70). Schudson (2006) agrees that experts must be educated in democratic values and held accountable because according to him, "a democracy without experts either will fail to get things done or will fail to satisfy citizens" (pp. 504-505). It is not only experts who are divided on technocratic rule. A 2017 Pew Research study of 38 nations shows that people are split on the idea of having a government led by technocrats; 49% think it is a good idea, while 46% of those surveyed believe it is a bad idea (Wike, Simmons, Stokes, & Fetterolf, 2017).

So how does this relate to Kent and the PTP sale? The problem with relying on experts is that research, statistics, and facts often take the place of deliberating with citizens (Fischer, 1990, p. 18). This is exactly what happened during the sale of PTP. Facing tough financial times, Kent leaders had city staff create a list of properties to sell. Kent's parks department staff, the city's experts on parks' affairs, determined which properties could be sold. Throughout the process of the sale, the council relied on upper-level parks employees to work out the finer details of the land sale^{iv} (PRC, 2016c). According to the city's own timeline, from 2012-2015, the council received only one update per year (PRC, 2016c). And at no point did the council ask the public what they thought about selling the park.

There are several reasons that cause council members, Kent included, to depend on experts. The first is that they lack resources. Kent council positions are part-time, not well-paid, and most of the councilmembers have jobs elsewhere (Hunter, 2015; Kent City Council, n.d.-a).

And unlike major cities, Kent's councilmembers do not have staff members working for them. Furthermore, the positions are non-partisan, meaning they lack the added support from political parties. Ross and Levine (2012) argue that "amateur, part-time legislators are in a poor position to challenge the reports and recommendations of the city manager, municipal department heads, and professional consultants" (p. 112). Without a staff, councilmembers do not have time to investigate claims made by the experts. They must trust whatever the professionals tell them. This is why they allowed the parks employees and city's attorneys to work out the details of this sale^v.

It is clear that the council trusted the parks department staff and made "assumptions" (PRC, 2016c, p. 12) based on their recommendations. The Kent city council members thought they and their staff knew best and had no need to notify the public of park sales (PRC, 2016c, p. 12). The council saw the park as "undeveloped, not centrally located, and difficult to access by vehicle" (PRC, 2016c, p. 12) and therefore, it made rational, reasonable sense to sell the park. The council would learn, three months after the sale, and ten years after the beginning of the surplus process, that the citizens of Kent did not rationalize the sale of a park in a cost-benefit manner. Once long-time neighbors of the park found out about the sale, there was no shortage of outrage and criticism from Kent residents. This situation could have possibly been prevented if elected officials had relied less on city staff and had brought the public into the conversation.

Lack of Meaningful Civic Engagement

The third issue facing local government is a lack of civic engagement. Scholars use different terminology like political engagement, citizen participation, and civic engagement to describe the same principle—citizens influencing policy, often through deliberation (Ross & Levine, 2012, p. 159; Arnstein, 2016; Levine, 2013, p. 15). Meaningful participation, for

Arnstein (2016), means giving power to the powerless, allowing citizens to contribute and influence policies that impact their lives (p. 282). This type of civic engagement, participatory and deliberative, researchers believe, is especially beneficial for democracy (Arnstein, 2016; Fung, 2007; Michels & Graaf, 2010; Levine, 2013; Putnam, 1995). Yet, many instances of civic engagement opportunities do not result in an ideal democracy where all affected interests have an equal say in the outcome (Goodin, 2007).

The problems with many government leaders' attempts to increase participation, according to Warren (2009), are that "most of the new experiments engage a relatively few citizens. Many involve only self-selected stakeholders and activists, and so by-pass broader public interests, or generate new forms of exclusion" (p. 3). Furthermore, what government agencies consider citizen participation may not resemble nor achieve a more democratic process (Lowndes & Wilson, 2001, p. 637; Ross & Levine, 2012, p. 162). To illustrate this point, Arnstein (2016) uses a ladder metaphor for levels of citizen participation. On the lowest rung are "illusory forms of 'participation'" (p. 284) that include placing people on "rubberstamp advisory committees or advisory boards for the express purpose of 'educating' them or engineering their support" (p. 284). As far as surveys and council meetings, Arnstein (2016) considers them "a window-dressing ritual" (p. 286). Elected officials get to check off that they included the public in their decision-making process. Higher on Arnstein's (2016) ladder are the rare participation methods that give citizens various levels of decision-making power (p. 289).

Even if the institutional design does provide ample opportunities for political engagement, some citizens do not participate for several reasons (Lowndes & Wilson, 2001, p. 637). One factor is the logistics of public meetings. People may not be able to attend a weeknight meeting due to work or family obligations. Others may not have sufficient transportation, speak

the same language, or be familiar with the procedures of government meetings (Lowndes & Wilson, 2001, p. 639). With that in mind, some cities, like Kent, live stream the meetings on social media and cable television and post the videos, agendas, and meeting minutes on their website. This is not an interactive means of engagement though. People who are not at the meeting cannot speak during the public comment segment.

Another reason people do not participate has to do with their attitudes towards politics and elected officials in general. According to Lowndes and Wilson (2001), many people feel the council will not respond to their concerns (p. 638). Or they may have an embittered view of politics and want nothing to do with it because they feel politicians are corrupt (Ekman & Amnå, 2012, p. 294). Those feelings can come from cultural cues or “unwritten customs and codes” (Lowndes, Pratchett, & Stoker, 2006, p. 546). Elected officials can explicitly state values of inclusiveness and working together to solve problems, but if their actions show otherwise, their words appear as platitudes, creating distrust.

Another theory of declining political participation relates to the larger issue of declining social capital. Sander and Putnam (2010) define social capital as “social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trust to which those networks give rise” (p. 9). Social organizations that foster community and trust include religious, labor, and school groups, to name a few. Putnam (1995) found that in a survey of 35 countries, “social trust and civic engagement are strongly correlated; the greater the density of associational membership in a society, the more trusting its citizens” (p. 73). Both Levine (2013) and Putnam (1995, 2000) agree that strong social capital is necessary for a healthy democracy. Levine (2013) argues that before people “will seek government reforms or participate effectively in the democracy they need to be enlisted and working together on public problems” (p. 149).

But Putnam (1995, 2000) and Levine (2013) paint a grim picture of civic engagement opportunities in the U.S. Putnam (1995, 2000) explores how declining social memberships has weakened social capital in the U.S. Over time, fewer people attend religious services or belong to labor unions or parent-teacher organizations, and this negatively impacts democracy because “members of associations are much more likely than nonmembers to participate in politics” (Putnam, 1995, p. 73).

Kent officials proclaim they want to foster civic engagement. One of the city council’s goals is “Embracing our diversity and advancing equity through genuine community engagement” (Kent Biennial Budget 2019-2020 [KBB], 2018, p. 19). However, they do not further define “genuine community engagement.” The current mayor is slightly clearer, “I believe that community engagement is more than just listening. It means acknowledging what was said and working together to get results” (City of Kent, 2019). The city’s webpage for boards and commissions clears things up a bit; the city “strongly encourages participation by the general public in local government. The Mayor and City Council believe the city is best served when there is broad representation of Kent residents serving on its boards, commissions and task forces” (City of Kent, n.d.-a). But looking further at the city’s nine commissions and boards reveals all but one, the Civil Service Commission, are advisory (City of Kent, n.d.-a). In other words, they make recommendations to the mayor and city council but do not have any authoritative power to create or change policy or plans.

Kent staff and elected officials do conduct surveys, hold public meetings that allow for public comment (although, the council does not have to respond and comments are limited to three minutes per person), and have events where residents can chat with city leaders. The city also has social media accounts to get information out, but those efforts are not meaningfully

democratic (Arnstein, 2016). The mayor and police chief, as a manner of professional courtesy, may listen to a citizen's concerns but there is no guarantee or assurance that anything will come of the conversation. In those situations, the city leaders have all the power.

To measure their goal of civic engagement, in 2018, the mayor used statistics for how many people attended an informational budget meeting, the number of followers on Kent's social media accounts, and the number of public videos the city staff produced (KBB, 2018, p. 25). The document states that these communications are not only informative but also "facilitate engagement between the City, residents, businesses, local partners and elected officials (KBB, 2018, p. 25). However, having more opportunities to express opinions does not have the same impact on citizens or elected officials as the empowerment of deliberative, participatory means of engagement (Michels & De Graaf, 2010; Fung, 2007; Levine, 2013; Putnam, 1995; Warren, 2009).

As for as the sale of PTP, one could blame the residents of Kent for not showing up to public meetings where staff brought up the sale, but, as mentioned earlier, there was no reasonable way anyone could have known about this sale from meeting agendas. And the elected officials, who say they value "genuine community engagement" (KBB, 2018, p. 19), failed to mention the sale to the public. Furthermore, despite the lack of institutional support for real participatory democratic endeavors, Kent residents upset about the PTP sale used every means available to engage with government officials and the public (see Appendix B for detailed information).

The council, on the other hand, admitted they made a mistake by not informing the public. The council president said he was at first unaware of the lack of public notice and said, "it was not anything on purpose" (Hunter, 2016a). He also argued, "There was nothing illegal or

unethical about the sale of Pine Tree Park. ... Our only error was not doing a better job engaging with the park's neighbors before making the tough decision to sell" (Westneat, 2016c). After three months of negative publicity and feedback, the council decided to pause the sale while they considered their options (Hunter, 2016a). The city council admitted their lack of public engagement "placed the city in a very difficult position and clouded the rest of the process" (PRC, 2016c, p. 13). And later that year, they adopted a policy for selling city-owned property that included public notification measures like "at least one public meeting to receive public comment; posted notice at the property; a public notice in the newspaper; and a mailing to property owners near the site" (Hunter, 2016g).

From the public's comments about the sale, it appears there was clearly a lack of trust—the key component of social capital and civic engagement motivation—between residents and the council. Multiple residents expressed their disapproval of the city and the sale using words and phrases like "untrustworthy" (Hunter, 2016b), "needs to rebuild trust" (Cross, 2016), "erosion of trust" (PRC, 2016a, p. 3), and "violated our trust" (Hunter, 2016a). The neighbors and supporters of the park, on the other hand, seemed to possess a strong enough trust in each other, despite not being a previously formalized social group, that they were able to unite in a cause (Save Pine Tree Park, n.d.). In this way, Kent residents challenge Levine's (2013) and Putnam's (1995) notion that people must first be engaged in social groups to impact policy. That said, residents may have prevented the issue if they had spoken up earlier about their support of parks and open spaces. Of course, they probably did not suspect that the city would sell a park without telling the public. Park supporters were ultimately limited by the lack of civic engagement prior to the sale. Levine (2013) says this is typical of government as "major institutions are set up to ignore and even frustrate civic engagement" (p. 15).

Solutions

So how can city governments address issues of declining civic engagement, technocratic-decision making, and the privileged position of business to increase democracy? Scholars agree that solving these issues is a necessary, albeit difficult task (Lowndes & Wilson, 2001, pp. 642-643; Putnam, 2000, p. 402; Lindblom, 1977, pp. 344-356). One solution which counters all three issues is increasing meaningful opportunities for civic participation. Yet, equalizing power relative to business interests also requires additional strategies like regional governmental restraints on business practices. Any efforts to change government institutions, people's level of political participation, and city leaders' favoritism toward business will require larger cultural shifts that are easier called for than implemented (Warren & Pearse, 2008, p. 3).

But there are cities and individuals around the world who have already started working toward more participatory forms of government. Several optimistic scholars use numerous examples of citizens taking an active role in local government decision-making processes to counter the issues of expert control and business privilege (Clark & Teachout, 2012; Steinberg, 2015; Levine, 2013). Both Levine (2013) and Putnam (2000) agree that improving civic education, strengthening existing social networks, like faith-based groups, and designing better public spaces for socializing, what Klinenberg (2018) calls "social infrastructure," are ways to foster civic engagement. While those measures are likely necessary, giving people opportunities to actively influence policy decisions, through institutional means, could most positively influence political participation (Levine, 2013, p. 185; Lowndes & Wilson, 2001).

One often cited example of successful participatory, deliberative democratic reform is the 2004 British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform (CA). The CA effectively created the opportunity and ensured more people participated in a policy decision. The CA "was

an independent, non-partisan assembly of 160 randomly selected British Columbians who looked at how votes cast in provincial elections translate into seats in the Legislature” (Citizens’ Assembly [CA], 2003). The CA was fully supported by the legislature and “given the time, power, support, and financing to return a credible, representative, and deliberative decision” (Warren & Pearce, p. 7; CA, 2003). After one year of learning about electoral systems, getting public feedback, and deliberating, the CA voted to change the electoral system and sent a referendum to the voters (Warren & Pearce, 2008, pp. 11-12). Ultimately, however, voters narrowly rejected the proposed changes in 2005 and then by a much wider margin in 2009 (Pilon, 2010).

Despite creating meaningful engagement by giving those involved the ability to construct policy, the failures of the CA indicate this type of reform is difficult, especially when legislators control the formation of the assembly and the rules that impact them, like requiring a supermajority for referendums (Carty, Blais, & Fournier, 2008, p. 160; Pilon, 2010). Nevertheless, the CA did give people a chance to participate, deliberate, and create potential policy, and, “offers a new pathway to democratic reform” (Ferejohn, 2008, p. 213) which could expand beyond electoral reform. And while the CA was ultimately unsuccessful in getting their voting reform passed, the example, overall, was intriguing enough that other citizens’ assemblies were created elsewhere (Carty, Blais, & Fournier, 2008, p. 159; Pilon, 2010, p. 74). Cities interested in increasing meaningful engagement opportunities could apply the CA example when determining other policies.

Another example of political reform that brings power to ordinary citizens is participatory budgeting (PB). PB started in Brazil in 1989 to counter council corruption in awarding development projects (Fung, 2007, p. 454). Since then, more than 1200 cities worldwide employ

PB (Clark & Teachout, 2012, p. 171-172). While the details of PB vary by city, the underlying principle is that residents, not elected officials, determine how to spend the city's money (Clark & Teachout, 2012, pp. 171-172; Levine, 2013, p. 121). Most often, this is done through initial deliberation by districts and then a public vote (p. 172). The most important aspect is that the "decisions by the citizens are binding" (Clark & Teachout, 2012, p. 172). PB not only increases participation but also gives power to ordinary citizens to significantly influence the livability of their neighborhood, and is therefore, an example of meaningful participatory democracy.

One of the most significant forms of meaningful participatory democracy is the New England (NE) style town hall meetings. These meetings go beyond the typical city council meeting where residents observe and give comment (Clark & Teachout, 2012, p. 178). Instead, in many NE towns, voters gather to deliberate and determine policy (p. 178). Despite lacking financial incentives and facing mundane city business topics, "town meetings still bring out hundreds of participants, in hundreds of towns across New England, *every single year*" (p. 180). Clark and Teachout (2012) argue this is because people value being able to make decisions and without this power there would not be much incentive to participate (p. 182). Furthermore, there are indications that this governance style leads to higher rates of social capital; "Vermont, where the Town meeting tradition is among the strongest, usually ranks in the top three, and often first" in U.S. measures of social capital (p. 180). NE townhalls successfully increase participation while also giving expansive power to citizens. That said, town meetings may not work everywhere. Clark and Teachout (2012) admit that "town meetings work better—dramatically better—in small towns than in large towns"(p. 179), with small towns being defined as "neighborhood-size" (p. 181).

For this reason, many U.S. cities have turned to neighborhood councils to involve the public in government processes (Gates, 2009). While neighborhood councils may increase political participation, researchers have concerns about their inclusiveness and impact on social capital (Dierwechter & Coffey, 2010, p. 485; Gates, 2009, p. 7; Michels & Graaf, 2010, p. 486). The councils, without proper implementation and rules, can turn into “local fiefdoms” (Dierwechter & Coffey, 2010, p. 486) in which people feel excluded. To be effective, democratically speaking, the city government needs to give the councils decision-making power and financial resources, foster a culture of supporting the councils, and ensure the councils are widespread (Ross & Levine, 2012, p. 166; Gates, p. 7). The neighborhood councils do not have the power to influence larger city-wide policies and so their participation in policy is limited to their neighborhood. Furthermore, without a sustainable source of funds, the councils cannot implement long-term policies that might significantly improve their quality of life. Without allowing neighborhood councils representation in policy decisions, their political participation is limited.

Other American cities are making strides in engaging citizens in different ways. Austin, Texas is a diverse city with 800,000 residents (Clark & Teachout, 2012, pp. 125-126) that has managed to create a culture of embracing community input. This is partly because city department leaders have learned that the council “may derail projects that have not adequately engaged citizens” (p. 125). Additionally, the city has a community engagement official who not only works with residents and staff to create various engagement tools that cater to Austin’s diverse population, but also ensures that city staff implement public input (pp. 125-126). While many of Austin’s civic engagement programs fail to allow citizens to create policy, there is an

assurance that the elected officials and city staff value and consider citizen feedback in policy decisions.

So far, all these examples have been governance-driven, but Putnam (2000) and Levine (2013) agree that institutional opportunities for participation are useless without individual and collective action (p. 414; p. 164). With that in mind, there are grassroots efforts which successfully get measures passed by increasing the number of people participating in political issues. These mobilizations can be especially useful when opposing business interests. Changing norms which may appear in conflict with economic development is not likely to happen easily, so citizens must create an intentional strategy. Furthermore, these strategies are transferable to other interest groups and can prompt larger movements (Levine, 2013, p. 188).

Part of that strategy includes determining the best way to get people involved and ensuring adequate policy follow through. Rosenblum (2015) explores the coalition building efforts of SeaTac airport workers pushing for a \$15 minimum wage. This was especially difficult because the business community, which included major airlines, had their own powerful coalition centered on a common interest, while the cultural and ethnically diverse residents and workers in SeaTac, where the voter initiative was being voted on, had to work toward finding common ground^{vi} (p. 14). For these reasons, workers had to appeal to larger cultural issues beyond raising the minimum wage. Instead, they framed their cause as a “community campaign to build worker power” (p. 14). With this broad message and the financial and leadership support of the workers’ unions, their efforts were ultimately successful and afterward, the coalition continued to pursue labor rights for other airport workers (p. 16).

Luce (2005), who studied living wage movements in the U.S., found that because living wage laws seem bad for business, cities are reluctant to enforce the measures (p. 86). Because of

this, the most successful living wage supporters had a long-term strategy that included not only passing the increased wage law but also incorporated implementation monitoring and enforcement. What Luce (2005) calls an inside/outside approach consists of having supporters outside the government, including those impacted by the ordinance, form coalitions and participate in activists' measures like protesting and monitoring the implementation of the law. The inside strategy ensures that the government has taken the necessary steps to enforce the law. Coalition members could even have a formal role in the implementation process (p. 86). The lesson for civic engagement is when pushing for policy change, especially if it counters a strong interest group like business, there must be a commitment and consideration of the long-term implementation enforcement.

Despite the successes of minimum wage coalitions in the U.S., there may be instances when the local government needs to implement external government controls on business to ensure all voices are being considered in policy decisions. Furthermore, local policies regarding business must be part of a region-wide scheme, otherwise, businesses can simply move to a neighboring city. These intergovernmental collaborations are part of the New Regionalism movement which Ross and Levine (2012) argue can also help cities gain more business (p. 258).

It is clear from the models above that any successful strategy to increase civic participation, to overcome technocracy and business interests, must be multifaceted and speak to larger cultural issues which impact a broad population. For example, in Kent, leaders must determine why people are upset about the council's seeming favoritism toward business. It is likely that the council's desire for development seems more important than quality of life concerns. To incorporate those views, the council will need to create opportunities for meaningful engagement which give power to residents. Additionally, the people of Kent will

have to push the council to provide these opportunities. Arnstein (2016) explains, “In most cases where power has come to be shared it was *taken by the citizens*, not given by the city” (p. 289). For Kent, this means their diverse community that consists of immigrants, refugees, and non-citizens and speaks more than 100 languages, will have to work together to build a coalition based on a broad agenda and focused on the long-term implementation of any policy, like the living wage cases in SeaTac.

As for the institutional civic engagement avenues which already exist in Kent, the city does have neighborhood councils, but they are voluntary and not every neighborhood has a council. Registered councils can “apply for a Matching Grants for neighborhood improvement projects” and get city provided publicity, training, and organizing support (City of Kent, n.d.-c). As described previously, this is not the ideal form of neighborhood councils. For these councils to be more democratic, they would need to incorporate all neighborhoods, provide universal funding, and allow members a seat at the policy-making table (Ross & Levine, 2012, p. 166; Gates, 2009, p. 7).

As far as more broad delegations of power like the CA, PB, and NE town halls, these efforts would likely take a lot of time and staff resources. Getting random citizens to participate in a year-long, CA type venture may prove challenging. The city would need to consider paying the participants, similar to U.S. juries, to encourage participation. Furthermore, “while deliberative approaches may be most likely to foster social capital, they may be inappropriate (for example) where local agencies are seeking quick responses from busy people, or where policy choices are tightly constrained by legislation or resource availability” (Lowndes & Wilson, 2001, p. 636). There may be certain policies, like redevelopment, that attract more

interest from residents than others (Adams, 2007, pp. 46-48). The Kent city council should focus their civic engagement on those areas first.

Due to financial constraints, lack of council resources, and the size and diversity of Kent's population, Kent's solutions for declining democracy may need to resemble those of Austin, which employs a variety of methods for engagement, has dedicated staff to monitor engagement and creates a positive civic engagement culture. Moreover, having a city community engagement staff member ensures a consistent commitment to engagement. Without this link between elected officials and the public, it is all too easy for elected official to blame issues on previous regimes.

To counter business interests, Kent leaders will, no doubt, have to work with regional partners, ensuring they have uniform policies to prevent businesses from favoring neighboring cities. To avoid backlash from residents though, Kent officials should also incorporate citizens into economic development planning. Residents can give more generalized opinions that include quality of life factors city experts may not consider during project planning.

While it could be argued that Kent residents may not embrace civic engagement opportunities, Dahl (1990) argues that is no reason not to try. He states, "if we were to abolish democracy wherever substantial segments of the population failed to use their opportunities to participate, there might not be much in the way of rule by the people of standing anywhere in the world" (p. 130). Kent's officials should consider democratization efforts even if the impact seems insignificant to them. These measures would also help the city council reach their goal of "Embracing our diversity and advancing equity through genuine community engagement" (City of Kent, n.d.-b).

Citizens, too, will need to manage their expectations. Michels and Graaf (2010) found that “most citizens take part in participatory policy making projects with enthusiasm, buoyed by the feeling that they can contribute to improvement in their neighbourhood” (p. 489) but that enthusiasm diminishes as they learn they may not have as much power to change things as they thought they did. For this reason, Michels and Graaf (2010) argue, governments will need to set clear guidelines for citizens (p. 489). Moreover, citizens will need to understand that grassroots organizing is not an easy one-time task. Instead, it requires a lasting dedication to the cause (Luce, 2005).

Conclusion

My research not only shows that there is room for improving democratic efforts in Kent’s government but also provides solutions that can create a meaningful participatory democracy. Obviously not all solutions are equally viable, as each city has unique circumstances, but that does not mean there are not pieces that can be adapted and successfully implemented to create more opportunities for political engagement. As stated earlier though, for any proposed solution to work, there must be a cultural shift. The public needs to see the benefits of participation and believe they can make a difference.

For Kent residents, they need look no further than the PTP sale. Through grassroots citizen engagement, lobbying, and threats of a lawsuit, residents convinced the council to back out of the sale (Hunter, 2016e). After an \$800,000 taxpayer-funded settlement with the housing developer and real-estate broker, the people of Kent got their park back (Hunter, 2016f). While the council learned a valuable lesson about the importance of notifying the public of public land sales beforehand, they failed to enact more meaningful civic engagement practices that extend

beyond land sales. The solutions I proposed could benefit city leaders and residents while also preventing another costly Pine Tree Park-type incident.

Examining Kent's PTP sale revealed the democratic challenges city level governments face and it shed light on how those challenges are not unique to Kent. Leaving people out of governing causes a reliance on experts and allows businesses to maintain their privileged position in government. This is not democratic rule by the public. If we are to thrive in a world of unprecedented challenges created by climate change and globalization, ordinary people are going to have to demand political decision-making power to overcome powerful, wealthy government and business interests.

The demand for participatory democracy must be universal and not limited to Kent or other U.S. cities. Declining democracy, especially as a result of a reliance on experts, failure to engage the public, and allowing business interests to dictate policies, impacts all people. Policy effects no longer have boundaries. Pollution, fires, animal extinctions, and workers' rights do not stop at state lines. It is all too easy for businesses to take their unfair labor practices and pollution elsewhere. Governments and the people must recognize this stark reality and understand that the policies of our local communities impact the larger society.

It takes only a few dedicated individuals to start a movement. What we need now is not only technical, scientific, and political experts but also people proficient in caring about others and willing to do the challenging work of ensuring all people have a say in their government. We are the experts of our own needs, wants, and desires. Let us determine the future for ourselves. Let us create the example that others can follow of a more democratic local government. Let us start the democratic revolution that reverses the trend of declining democracy.

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Appendix A

Pine Tree Park Timeline

In 1968, King County voters approved a land preservation bond and with some of that money the county bought a 10-acre parcel for PTP (Westneat, 2016a). By 1996 the city of Kent had grown and annexed that section of King County (Kent Ordinance No. 3241, 1995). This annexation required an amendment to the city's comprehensive plan, in which the council designated PTP as open space (Kent Ordinance No. 3261, 1996). For the next ten years, Pine Tree Park maintained its status as a park.

Right from the beginning, the sale lacked transparency. Selling PTP was not listed on the agenda for the December 13th, 2005 council meeting, but rather added during the meeting (Kent City Council, 2005a; Kent City Council, 2005b). The minutes state the parks director said, "funds from the surplus would be used to build two new parks" (p. 6). For another nine years, there was no public mention of this sale; All business occurred through email or in closed executive session (PRC, 2016c).

At the end of October 2014, city staff listed Pine Tree Park for sale at \$2.2 million and, shortly thereafter, a housing developer offered full price for the park (PRC, 2016c, p. 7). This sale required changing the zoning of the park to allow for a housing development. And so, finally, on January 12, 2015, the sale was briefly mentioned at an Economic & Community Development (ECDC) Committee meeting, but it was not specifically mentioned on the posted agenda. One must read to page 49 of the agenda notes to see it mentioned, kind of; PTP is listed in a table under the category "City property acquisition, sale or development" (Kent ECDC, 2015a). That could mean anything from selling to improving the park. In July 2015, the park, by its name, was mentioned in an ECDC meeting and the minutes (Kent ECDC, 2015b, p. 4). The

next month the ECDC voted to send the ordinance to the full council (Kent ECDC, 2015c, August, pp. 4-5). It was then mentioned in a council meeting agenda packet in September 2015 on page 587 on a map which says, “Park & Open Space to Single Family (SF-4.5)” (Kent City Council, 2015a). At the same time, in the same agenda packet, “included as a separate ordinance for the same overall comprehensive plan agenda item is the updated 2015 Comprehensive Plan wherein PTP is on the map of parks and recreation facilities in the Parks and Recreation Element (as it has been for many years)” (PRC, 2016c, p. 10). The council adopted both the comprehensive and the contradictory land use plan.

City staff did everything like appraising the land and posting the property for sale behind the scenes. There was a lot of negotiating with the county and other agencies that got done through phone calls and emails to make this sale happen. Complicating the matter was the King County Ordinance signed in 1996 which stated, “The city covenants to operate and maintain the site in perpetuity as a public open space ... except that the City may trade the site or part of the site for property of equal or greater parks and recreational value” (King County Ordinance No. 12157). City staff had to ensure the sale was viable. After getting a full-price offer, the city council voted and unanimously approved the sale (PRC, 2016c, p. 10).

This vote came during the September 15, 2015 city council meeting, but was not specifically listed on the agenda and happened after an executive session (Kent City Council, 2015b). The agenda was labeled: “EXECUTIVE SESSION AND ACTION AFTER EXECUTIVE SESSION A. Property Negotiations, as per RCW 42.30.110(1)(c)” (Kent City Council, 2015b, p. 4). So, there was an open meeting, council went into an extended executive session, came back at 8:52 PM, and voted to approve the sale (Kent City Council, 2015c, pp. 6-7). The vote was listed in the agenda packet for the next regular council meeting three weeks

later (Kent City Council, 2015d, pp. 26-27). The Pine Tree residents did not find out about the sale until they happened to see a public notice sign posted in the park in December 2015, three months after the sale and eleven years after the city started working on the sale (PRC, 2016c).

Appendix B

Citizen Response to the PTP Sale

People opposing Kent's PTP sale used various tactics to keep the city from finalizing the sale with the housing developer. They spoke to reporters and wrote newspaper editorials from January through April 2016 (Brantner, 2016; Cross, 2016; Gill, 2016; Honeycutt, 2016; Hunter, 2016a; Marachario, 2016; Westneat, 2016b). People spoke at city council and parks and recreation commission meetings^{vii} (Kent City Council, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2016d, 2016e, 2016f; PRC, 2016a, 2016b). The comments and editorials showed people were equally frustrated with losing the park to a housing developer and the lack of public notice.

A group of residents also organized online resources for people hoping to save the park. They started an online petition, which 309 people signed, urging the council and mayor to reverse the sale of the park (Hunter, 2016c; Save Pine Tree, 2016). They also set up an informational website and an online fundraising effort to help pay for an attorney to represent the group (Herrick, 2016). They were able to meet their goal of \$3,500. One resident also put up signs in and near the park, informing the community about the "Save Pine Tree Park" website and an upcoming PTP meeting. One reporter stated in March 2016 that "Residents have hammered the council with public comment at each council meeting the last two months, emails to the council and Kent Reporter letters to the editor asking the board to keep the park" (Hunter, 2016d). Political engagement on the part of citizens was not lacking when it came to the PTP sale.

ⁱ It should be noted that these other properties were not designated parks.

ⁱⁱ The parks department has been severely underfunded for years and is facing a \$60 million backlog (Hunter, 2017, May 12).

ⁱⁱⁱ Fischer (1990) gives an extensive history of the rise of technical expertise in politics in her book *Technocracy and the Politics of Expertise*.

^{iv} Due to the laws surrounding the covenants of the park, made during the transfer from King County to Kent in 1996, selling the land required clarification from King County. Obtaining these clarifications was left to city staff. For example, in 2012, parks staff asked for legal advice on whether “the City could sell it [PTP], or if the City literally had to ‘trade’ the property for another property (PRC, 2016, p. 2). A city attorney found the deed “somewhat ambiguous” (p. 2), so a few months later, Kent staff members began consulting with the county about the legality of the sale (p. 3). The council could have read the deed themselves, which clearly states, “The City covenants to operate and maintain the site in perpetuity as a public open space ... except that the City may trade the site ... for property of equal or greater parks and recreational value” (King County Ordinance No. 12157, 1996). And they could have done their own consulting with the county, but instead, they entrusted the experienced parks administrators. Their reliance on experts turned out to be misguided. Several months after the council approved selling PTP, with the belief that they could upgrade another park, the county attorney notified Kent that they must use the proceeds to buy additional park property (PRC, 2016c, p. 11). That scenario defeated the purpose of selling the park.

^v This is also why councilmembers believed the parks employee when he told them that the county said it was acceptable for Kent to sell PTP with the intent of reinvesting in an existing

nearby park, instead of buying replacement park land. The council's reliance on city staff led to a significant misunderstanding between the county and the city.

^{vi} According to Rosenblum (2015), many of the workers at the airport were immigrants and refugees with various religions and ethnicities, while “62 percent of the registered voters were white, and overall more conservative than the airport workers and their allies” (p. 14).

^{vii} Kent's Parks and Recreation Commission was formed in late 2014 and had its first meeting in January of 2015. At the February 2016 PRC meeting, the parks director stated that because the PTP sale was already in motion, he did not bring it up at any previous commission meetings. He said that “when council has already commissioned staff to proceed with a directive, it's not brought to staff or an advisory group to ask for an opinion” (PRC, 2016a, p. 3). For that reason, the commission played no role in the decision to sell the park. After the sale was made public, the commission discussed the sale, listened to public comment, and some members attended other public meetings about the sale (PRC, 2016a, 2016b).