RURAL DEMOCRACY (A)

Tom Skinner needed no introduction to the economics or the politics of rural Polk County, Georgia (population 5,696). He was a native of the county, the son of a local farmer, and one of many of his contemporaries who had forsaken family farming for other careers. Skinner had completed his education at Georgia Tech and, after working briefly in Atlanta, returned home, where the Polk County Council had appointed him county administrator, a position from which he could view the values of his lifetime neighbors with a new detachment.

Skinner knew that the traditions of farm life had imbued Polk County residents with a sense of pride, resiliency, and self-reliance. He also knew that those qualities could be translated into cautious, conservative, and sometimes stubborn opinions about political and governmental activity. Thirty per cent of the county's population qualified for some form of public assistance, for example, but fewer than five per cent availed themselves of those opportunities and services.

This was useful information for Skinner as he began to address a public education dilemma that was nearing a crisis stage in the county. The dilemma centered around Martin Elementary School, a New Deal-era institution, which had been built as a Works Progress Administration project in the 1930s. Martin was one of two elementary schools serving the sparsely-populated county. In its day, it had been a model of progressive school design and construction.

Changing times and deterioration had taken their toll on the old Martin structure. Most significantly, the school lacked a kitchen for the preparation of hot lunches, and it had never been equipped for air conditioning. As a result, box lunches were prepared at the county's other elementary school and delivered daily for Martin Elementary's students, and when the South Georgia temperature became excessive, the children were simply sent home for the day, or until things cooled down.

The school had other deficiencies, as well. State regulations specified things like the location of exterior doors and the number of toilets required to serve a student population of that size. Martin Elementary did not measure up in either instance, and to make matters worse, the lead-based paint on walls of its hallways and classrooms had been declared hazardous to children by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).
In short, Martin Elementary had outlived its usefulness, and many believed that it should be closed. County Administrator Skinner, once a Martin student himself, knew that, and he set about developing short- and long-term strategies to address the issue. His plan provided that:

- In the short-term, Martin students would be bused to the other elementary school site 13 miles away and would be housed there in temporary, pre-fabricated units;
- Within 18 months, a new school would be built on a site near the old Martin School, to be funded by county general obligation bonds.

All seven Polk County Council members encouraged Skinner to proceed. During the four years he had served the county as administrator, he had always exercised good judgment about capital projects, and everything else for that matter. Half the council members were approaching another cycle in their two-year terms, so to Skinner, their “go-ahead” was an expression of the confidence they had in him.

With the council’s encouragement, Skinner turned his attention to what he knew would be a tough stumbling block: the proud, cautious, and sometimes stubborn citizens of Polk County. He met with school boards, teachers, and interested parents, assuring and reassuring them that the relocation was temporary and that disruption to the operation of both schools would be minimal. The meetings went smoothly, with few concerns being expressed.

Skinner went back to the council armed with site selection plans and a financing scheme for the new school, and armed also with what he thought was well-orchestrated public support. He had located second-hand classroom pre-fabs and determined that the present bus fleet and corps of drivers were adequate to meet their expanded duties in the interim. As far as Skinner was concerned, all systems were go, and the council unanimously approved the final plan.

Next came the financial phase of the operation. A Georgia statute required a three-step process for the issuance of general obligation bonds: 1) public notice, 2) public hearing, and 3) a binding public referendum. The notice was properly filed and published, and the local press provided what Skinner thought was balanced coverage.

But the hearing, convened two weeks after the notice, was far from “balanced.” Skinner had hardly completed his brief presentation when the first question came, setting the tone for the rest of the evening.

“What right does the government have to tell us our school is not good enough? It was good enough for many of us when we went there.”

Skinner, calling on his lifetime of Polk County sensitivities, knew it was no time to talk about things like lead-based paint, the EPA, or the location of emergency exits. At best, he hoped, he
could keep the conversation focused on the topic of education. But, the good farmers of Polk County weren't about to be restrained by their county administrator, even if he was a local boy.

Unlike the earlier conversations with parents, teachers, and board members, the discussions at the public hearing shifted from education issues to more general topics, and the hearing became a forum for the Polk County citizens to express not only latent misgivings about government, but also specific concerns about a whole range of topics, including creationist teaching, prayer in school, sex education, the spotted owl, storm water treatment fees, potholes on county roads, and the new fax machine in the county administrator's office. At that point Skinner recognized that his plan was in trouble.

A week later, when the bond referendum went before the public, Skinner's concerns were borne out. Polk County voters rejected the general obligation bond issue that would have funded the replacement school for Martin Elementary by 63 percent to 37 percent. Twenty-four percent of the registered voters in Polk County voted in the referendum.

The defeat clearly scuttled Tom Skinner's plan and sent him back to the drawing board. It also raised questions for him about the meaning and intent of the outcome. Was the vote strictly an expression of pocketbook concerns, he wondered. Was it a vote of “no confidence” in government? And, perhaps most importantly, was it a message of anti-education sentiment in the community? Answering those questions could help Skinner shape his strategy and define his next steps. The options available depended on his reading of the sentiments of his lifelong friends and neighbors in Polk County.

The simplest option was to do nothing, to keep Martin Elementary in operation and run whatever risks were implicit in that decision: fines from state and federal authorities, ongoing inconvenience to users of the building, and potential liability from health and safety hazards.

There were other, less conventional options. Skinner was familiar with at least two courses of action that could lead to the construction of a replacement school:

- **Lease-Purchase.** A private developer could be engaged to build the new school at his own expense, with the understanding that the county would enter into a long-term lease agreement to occupy and use the school. Once the lease payments had permitted the developer to retire his own debt and expenses, the building would revert to county ownership. Since lease payments were not considered long-term debt, the agreement would not require public referendum approval. The costs of such an arrangement, however, were generally higher than for general obligations bonds and would result in an increase of county property taxes of about 10 per cent.

- **Special Legislative Action.** The Georgia General Assembly could be asked to create a special school authority and to grant it the powers to issue general obligations bonds. Since the newly-created special authority would be neither city nor county, it would not be subject
to the referendum requirement. The Assembly, in fact, routinely approved the creation of such authorities upon the failure of bond issues in public referenda.

Tom Skinner himself had a streak of Polk County stubbornness in him. He pondered the options and picked up the phone to call his Council Chair.

“Let's have a cup of coffee downtown,” he said. “Maybe we're not dead yet.”