

Entrepreneurship in City Immigration Policy

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Abstract

How an issue gets on the governmental agenda has been an important topic for many years. Cobb and Elder theorize key to change is a “triggering point”, whereas Kingdon informs us that the change occurs with the convergence of the three streams of problems, politics, and policies producing a window opportunity. Important to each theory is the role of an entrepreneur to move the issue through the policy making process. The City of Dalton, Georgia as one of the first new destinations for large scale immigration is a case study that supports the theories of Cobb and Elder and a Kingdon is also applicable at the local level.

Many local governments have been grappling with the relatively new issue of immigration for several years. While some believe immigration policy should be a federal responsibility the results of new immigrants to new destinations is played out in America's cities, towns, and counties. Hence, we have the opportunity to view how the various laboratories of democracy are experimenting with this issue. Many local jurisdictions and some states have taken various initiatives while others have yet to respond.

Which issues that are responded to and which are not is a perennial subject in the world of politics and governance. What gets on the government agenda for action or non-action is an important and well studied aspect of public policy. Cobb and Elder (1972) concluded the key was to find the "triggering point" whereas Baumgartner & Jones (1993) found it to be the level of salience of the issue. Kingdon (1995) instructs us that an item reaches the agenda when the three streams of problems, politics, and policy converge. This convergence is unpredictable but when it does occur a window of opportunity for change results. "The key to understanding agenda and policy change is their coupling" (Kingdon, p.87). In most cases, a champion appears be it an individual, group, or industry that makes the linkages and takes advantage of the open window. The term "policy entrepreneur" captures the force or at least the catalyst to move an idea to policy action. Kingdon defines a policy entrepreneur as an "advocate" with similar characteristics of a business entrepreneur. They are "willing to invest their resources—time, energy, reputation, and sometimes money—in the hope of some return (p. 122-123). In his in-depth case studies of 23 federal level agencies, Kingdon found policy

entrepreneurs important in 15 with only 3 cases in which they were coded unimportant (p. 180).

While Kingdon developed his theory on the federal level it has application on the local level as well. In Dalton, Georgia the three streams converged and a policy entrepreneur emerged to make policy changes in local immigration issues. Unlike Kingdon's process, however, the policy entrepreneurs in Dalton did not have a cure looking for a disease. According to Kingdon, the policy entrepreneur "must be ready, ... must develop their ideas, expertise, and proposals well in advance of the time the window opens (p. 181). "Have idea will shoot" (p. 183) was not the case in Dalton's immigration approach. Instead the local entrepreneur coupled the streams to create a window for change by identifying and exposing that the community had a problem. The solution, or at least an effort to alleviate the problem, was created by the entrepreneur's efforts and expertise once the community was convinced change was needed.

The City of Dalton, Georgia (pop. 32,000) has been a "new destination" for Latinos for well over fifteen years and, therefore, immigration issues are nothing new to the community. Located in North Georgia on Interstate 75 just south of Chattanooga, TN and north of Atlanta, Dalton is the center of the carpet-making proudly boosting itself as, "The Carpet Capital of the World." Long an industrial district focused on a single industry, Dalton manufacturers made many technological improvements in carpet making and developed the tufted method, yielding a better and faster made product. The industry was a boon to the Dalton area beginning in the 1980s. While technologically advanced, the industry is still relatively labor intensive. With the nation-wide housing boom and a

preference for carpet, the industry in Dalton needed workers. This steady need for workers superseded the global and national slowdowns of the period.

Mexican migration to the area began in the 1970s fueled by demands of the poultry industry and the construction of a federal reservoir north of the city. Shortly thereafter, the lure of better working conditions and better pay drew workers to the carpet-making companies in the area and set the stage for fast growth to meet the labor demands that occurred in the following decades. Federal government policies also contributed to the growth of Latino immigrants in the region. In 1986 Congress passed The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which included an effort to clear the board on undocumented persons in the U.S. by offering a form of amnesty. Most of those utilizing the offer were males and their desire for family reunification in the U.S. created a new kind of illegal traffic (Suro, 1999). An implementation decision was made on the federal level not to interfere with the family reunification process. This unintended outcome affected Dalton. As Hernandez and Zuniga (2005) state, IRCA “marked a watershed in Mexico-U.S. migration history and signaled the initiation of mass Latino inflows to Dalton and many other nontraditional destinations across the country.” The word was out: newly documented Latinos recruited others to come to Dalton, where the wages were good, the work was steady, and “you could work indoors.” The city experienced a large influx of Latinos during the 1990’s and by 2000, forty percent of the city population was Latino. The impact of Latino immigration in the area becomes striking when reviewing the percentages of Latinos in the Dalton public schools. In the 1989-90 school year the enrollment showed less than four percent but by the end of the

decade Latinos held a majority in the schools. The 2007-2008 school year reported 65 per cent of the children to be Latino (Dalton City District, 2008).

City leaders hardly knew that a burgeoning Latino population was building in the city until the early nineties. By the mid-nineties, however, local government leaders were convinced the changing demographics were impacting the delivery of municipal services and creating anti-immigrant sentiment.

It was in this context of a sudden change in the make-up of the city's population that the Dalton city government was to operate. By 1994, at the request of the elected officials, the city administrator began a search for ways other cities in the South with similar situations had responded. However the results were inadequate. "There was simply nothing out there" that Dalton could use as a model (Sanders, 2006). During this time a "triggering event" (Cobb and Elder, 1972) occurred in an unfortunate shooting between two undocumented immigrants which prompted the Police Chief to begin collaboration with other government agencies. His goal was to establish a federal immigration office in the city. The chief, a proponent of the community policing philosophy, was specific in his reasons:

[T]he police department wants to accomplish three objectives by establishing an INS office in Dalton. First we want to increase the community's ability to identify illegal aliens and deal with them appropriately. We'd also like to have an INS expert available locally to help identify forged documents and lastly we'd like some assistance tackling the language barrier immigrants present (Douthat, 1995).

The collaboration was successful and in September, 1995, a first of its kind Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), now the Immigration and Customs

Enforcement (ICE) office, opened in Dalton. The office was jointly funded by the city and the county and staffed with two law enforcement officers and support staff from each jurisdiction. The Police Chief submitted a report of accomplishments in the first year and half of existence which included: 650 persons placed in deportation proceedings, 4 corporate raids apprehending 245 undocumented workers, 4 smuggling loads apprehending 55 aliens, 627 intelligence files compiled, 11 search warrants, and 100 criminal alien arrests (Chadwick, 1997).

At the same time as the law enforcement initiative began, city officials were also developing an Intercultural Task Force. In mid summer 1995, over 70 residents met to organize and decide how to proceed. Those attending included a broad-based sample of persons including Latinos. As the city administrator emphasized, “We wanted to be sure that as many different views as possible were represented in the city-wide effort (Sanders, 2006).” The Mayor stated the objectives of the newly formed task force:

1. Create an organized, controlled forum whereby open lines of communication can be formed between: Local government and Hispanic community; Local government and citizens angry with the Hispanic community; and all segments and cultures of our community
2. Through a series of organized subcommittee meetings give the community a chance to voice civilly the problems or issues as they see them, to address the problems from all perspectives in frank, open-minded discussion and seek to draft action plans zeroing in on possible solutions
3. Have City staff author a compilation report combining findings of all subcommittees. This report will not and should not be viewed as a “Grand Solution”, but as a document to begin working from to lessen our problems and heal the rifts in our community (Sanders, 1995).

The group divided itself into five subcommittees: Housing, Public Relations, Education/Communication, Law Enforcement, and Human Resources/Industrial

Relations. The city-led meeting had pre-selected the subcommittees and listed the mission for each. Council members served as moderators for each subcommittee and the city assured a balanced representation for each group. For instance, each subcommittee had at least one Hispanic representative. The groups met regularly over the next few months and each subcommittee produced a set of recommendations for local and state actions. The introduction of the final report labeled the effort a success and paid high compliments to the process of openness.

A review of the various issues discussed and recommendations made indicates a broad range of actions items including both short and long range suggestions. For example, the Housing subcommittee listed twelve recommendations mostly involving improvements in code enforcement practices and suggested better relations between landlord and tenant. It was evident, however, in reviewing the results of all the committee reports that the language barrier was a primary ingredient in most of the community issues.

Several of the recommendations have been acted upon by the city. These include more recreational opportunities (soccer fields), community sponsored social events, search for multi-lingual employees, support for business development for Latinos, housing opportunities, and expansion of the local Post Office. With communication blocked by the language barrier, the main focus has been within the public schools. The inter-cultural task force underscored what a leadership group in Dalton had identified a year earlier: break down the language barriers. These conclusions set the cornerstone of Dalton's proactive effort: The Georgia Project.

Descriptions of the reality of what was going on in Dalton's classrooms paint an intractable situation. Each year brought in more students speaking only Spanish with most of the teachers speaking only English. Education is typically a high priority policy in most communities and Dalton was no exception. "Dalton residents have long prided themselves on the quality of their public schools; per-pupil expenditures and test scores are among the highest in the state" (Kirp 2000, 27). This pride was being challenged and fear of losing the quality of education banner was a community concern. Stopgap measures were in place but they were failing. There simply were not enough Spanish-speaking teachers available.

Another "triggering event" occurred that sparked a dramatic change in the public schools. In 1997, Erwin Mitchell, a prominent local leader, visited a Dalton school at the request of his exasperated daughter who was a teacher's aid. After the visit, Mitchell had two major conclusions: "One was that the situation was deplorable—students weren't learning, teachers were despondent, everybody was losing." The other was that "if we couldn't find the Spanish-speaking teachers we needed [in the United States], we would have to go elsewhere" (Maggs, 1998). Mitchell was further disturbed at hearing that the school board had no action plan to alleviate the problem.

Mitchell was well prepared to take on Dalton's big issue. As a former U.S. Congressman, former State Senator of the Dalton area, and former city attorney, Mitchell was well connected in the community and Georgia. His connections proved to be an effective means to get something done. In explaining the conditions and need of their public schools to others in his network, Mitchell learned of a corporate carpet executive with ties to Monterrey, Mexico. In turn, this connection led to a contact to administrators

at the University there. This connection provided a win-win situation as Monterrey officials were having problems with their education graduates finding jobs. Hence, an exchange program was born.

Initial contacts followed by many faxes and other communications led to a visit of Dalton leadership to the University of Monterrey. According to Mitchell, Dalton officials going to Monterrey was a key decision. “Their thinking [the Monterrey officials] was if we were really serious about working with them we should come to their country instead of them coming to ours” (Mitchell, 2007). In turn, a delegation from Monterrey came to Dalton and after several meetings the Monterrey Accord was signed by the two parties.

The accord was the basis of the Georgia Project and contained four initiatives:

- A bilingual teacher program to bring graduates from the University of Monterrey to Dalton
- The design of a bilingual education curriculum
- A Latino adult education and leadership initiative
- A summer institute for local Georgia teachers to learn Spanish and Mexican history and culture in Monterrey (Hernandez and Zuniga 2005, 256).

With the agreement in place and a relationship forged the Georgia Project had made a major step toward attacking the educational issue in Dalton. While the cost of developing the agreement was relatively insignificant and funded mostly by private donors, the implementation of the agreement was not funded and the amount to make it work was significant. Mitchell was undaunted and captured the essence of his commitment to the Georgia Project effort; “My philosophy has been that if a position is correct, it’s never too risky” (Hamann 2005, 69). Indeed, funding came through from the city about a month after the agreement was formalized. The city council unanimously funded the project at a level of \$250,000 per year for three years. In 1997, Dalton’s population was nearing 20,000 and this financial commitment was large. Fortunately for

the proponents of the Georgia Project a reallocation formula had been made with the area's utility department that produced a major windfall for Dalton. According to Mayor Jim Elrod (who was a council member in 1997), there was no opposition to the funding on the council and little negativism from the general public (Elrod, 2007).

With a ten-year history now, the Georgia Project has been continually fulfilling its mission and accomplishing its vision. After the three-year start-up funds provided by the city expired, the Georgia Project received funding via direct federal assistance from Georgia's senators, federal grants, and a wide variety of private contributions. But none have equaled the commitment from the city. At times the Georgia Project has come close to being unfunded and abandoned. More times than not, however, Mitchell has prevailed. "Getting funding it not my strong suit but for the Georgia Project funding has been almost provident" (Mitchell, 2007). Though many successes have occurred during this time, Mitchell was right: "almost provident" but not complete. The Georgia Project closed shop in 2008 due to lack of funding with the conclusion it had fulfilled its mission.

In summary, triggering events when coupled with sustained policy entrepreneurship yielded change. The Dalton experience illustrates at least two policy entrepreneurs capitalized on an opening a policy window for change. The Police Chief was successful in collaborative efforts to establish a special INS office in the city and Mr. Mitchell was successful in the creation of the Georgia Project. Without the concerted efforts of these entrepreneurs such triggering points might have gone for naught.

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