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A Case Study: Achieving Cultural Equity through the Lens of Kingdon

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A Case Study: Achieving Cultural Equity through the Lens of Kingdon

In *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies (1995)*, John Kingdon states that “problems or politics by themselves can structure the *governmental* agenda, but the probability of an item rising on the *decision* agenda is dramatically increased if all three streams – problems, policies and politics – are joined” (page 178). The system of change outlined in this book provided me with a framework to better understand how, in the mid-1990s, we were able (against all odds) to get two key pieces of legislative codified in the City and County of San Francisco’s Charter.

Over the course of 1994 and 1995, a Charter Reform Committee met with individuals and advocacy groups from San Francisco to hear testimony about what works and does not work in City government. Although the San Francisco Charter cannot be changed without a ballot proposition and a majority vote by the electorate, it does require the same “coupling” of problems, policies, and politics that Kingdon outlines. It must first be passed by the Board of Supervisors before it can be placed on the ballot.

My role was one of community arts¹ advocate, or as Kingdon classifies it, I was the “specialist.” The specialist, according to Kingdon is an individual who gains a “gradual accumulation of knowledge and perspectives in a given policy area” (page 17). With my constituency in mind, I read and analyzed hundreds of pages of the current charter in order to make a compelling case for what would become two key recommendations for change.

I worked with T.J. Anthony, aide to Supervisor Barbara Kaufman and staff to the Charter Reform Committee², to develop a case for why certain changes were needed. It is true that Mr. Anthony wielded a “great impact on the shape of public policy” and would exert significant influence in what did and did not make it in front of the Committee members (page 42). Mr. Anthony, the Committee members and I made-up what Kingdon refers to as the “Iron Triangle” as we were “alleged to be impenetrable from the outside (page 33)” on these issues.

¹ I conducted this work with, on behalf of, and in the role of President of the San Francisco Consortium of Community Cultural Centers and President of the San Francisco Arts Democratic Club

² Supervisors Barbara Kaufman, Susan Leal, and Mabel Teng

First, we addressed the lack of ethnic representation in City Commissions. In 1995, after being rebuffed by Frank Jordan's chief of staff when I questioned his boss' pattern of over-appointing white commissioners, I conducted an analysis of all San Francisco commissions by surveying the secretaries about the ethnic and sexual orientation makeup of their commissions. I found that 60% of the filled seats were white. Gay men commissioners were 93% white. Both the Health Services Commission and the Retirement System Commission were 100% white. Although this disparity was acknowledged as a "condition" by the Mayor's Office, it was not considered a problem; and I quote, "White men have more experience in investing our retirement funds." The Iron Triangle, however, believed that reversing this pattern was the "right thing to do" (page 125). We were successful in our efforts and the Charter now includes language that commissions shall "broadly represent the diversity of the City."

Secondly, we addressed the inequitable distribution of public funding allocated to support city-owned arts buildings. By 1993, I had spent years hearing "our hands are tied by the City Charter" from the Board of Supervisors, Mayor's Office, and Arts Commissioners. They asserted that the Charter's language mandated fiscal support to mainstream arts facilities and specifically, \$1.25 million to operate and maintain the War Memorial and Performing Arts Center, a city-owned campus that houses a theater and the opera, symphony, and ballet. The four city-owned neighborhood cultural centers³, on the other hand, were originally built for purposes other than cultural facilities and were looking tired and run-down, crumbling in disrepair, and increasingly structurally unsafe. The Arts Commission wanted nothing more than to wipe their hands free of the headache known as the Community Cultural Centers and often threatened to give the buildings over to the Department of Public Works.

In 1994, and on behalf of the cultural centers, I conducted an analysis comparing the FY9293 operating budgets for maintenance, security, and facility operations of each of the four cultural centers against the budget for the War Memorial and Performing Arts Center. My goal was to ascertain what dollars the War Memorial needed to maintain a clean, safe, and aesthetically beautiful experience for patrons of the arts. Not surprisingly, I found many

³ South of Market Cultural Center, Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts, Bayview Opera House and Center for African and African American Art and Culture (Western Addition).

disparities in how funds were invested. For example, the window washer of the War Memorial made more money than any of the Executive Directors of the cultural centers. It was always known that the War Memorial was a huge complex attended by many people – thousands more than any one community cultural center. The budget comparison alone was not going to be persuasive. I calculated the “Investment per Patron Rate” for the War Memorial and each of the four cultural centers and found that the City invested \$4.20 per person at the War Memorial and \$0.41 per person at the African and African American Art and Cultural Center operating just down the block in the heart of the Western Addition. This indicator boiled down the story so effectively that the Board of Supervisors and the then mayoral candidates took serious note. The disparity was brought-up in every mayoral debate. It got to the point that candidates and supervisors were highlighting the disparity on their own and manifesting the phenomena that Kingdon refers to when politicians “compete with one another to claim credit for some initiative that they sense will be popular” (page 157).

Seeing that the political will was building, we wrote language for the Charter Reform Committee that mirrored the decades-old Charter language that assured mainstream arts institutions were supported by the City. First, that the Art Commission must “...assure that the City and County-owned community cultural centers remain open, accessible and vital contributors to the cultural life of the City and County.”⁴ Secondly, that San Francisco appropriate “an amount sufficient for the purpose of maintaining, operating, providing for the security and superintending of their facilities and grounds, and for the purchase of objects of art, literary productions, and other property, and for their expansion and continuance in the City and County of San Francisco.”⁵

We knew the opportunity would pass if, as Kingdon says, “the ready alternative is not available” (page 170). Our alternative had been vetted and shaped with Mr. Anthony before it went to the Committee chairs, so it was no surprise that the Committee for Charter Reform incorporated this language into their proposal or that the Board of Supervisors passed it. In exchange, however, the Committee expected our help in mitigating “negative blocking” (page

⁴ San Francisco Charter, Article V Executive Branch – Arts and Culture Sec. 5.103. Arts Commission

⁵ San Francisco Charter, Sec. 16.106 Cultural, Educational and Recreational Appropriations

49) that was sure to – and did – come from community advocates about the other changes in Charter language that would shift more power to the Mayor.

In November 1995, voters adopted the San Francisco Board of Supervisors' Charter including our cultural equity language, making it effective July 1, 1996.⁶

Significant changes followed. Accountability that was once only afforded to an elite patronage would extend to communities of color and their art forms. However, charter reform alone did not make money automatically flow that direction, it simply made it possible. Members of the Consortium of Community Cultural Centers joined forces to lobby for funds and to identify sources. We learned that the Candlestick Park bonds were about to expire. With Supervisor Sue Bierman's office, we developed administrative code that would reallocate those funds upon their expiration to the Community Cultural facilities. In doing so, no program would experience a budget cut in order to fund the cultural centers. Again, we had established the motivating force by defining the problem and developing a palatable alternative. We gained support from key members of the Board of Supervisors, including the three chairs of the Charter Reform Committee.

Kingdon is right. The "chances for a problem to rise on the decision agenda are dramatically increased if a solution is attached, if it technically feasible and implementable. They are acceptable in the light of the values held by members of the policy community and include not only notions of the proper role and size of government but also concepts of equity and efficiency" (page 143). Newly-elected Mayor Willie L. Brown "brought a new administration and changes in policy agendas" (page 153) and he was in support of the reallocation.

It was a hopeful time: Frank Jordan was gone, commissioners would begin to look like the people they represented, the charter language promoted equity, and funds were allocated. We witnessed the situation Kingdon describes as "when problems involve comparisons and if

⁶ Per Summary provided by San Francisco Public Library SAN FRANCISCO SELECT COMMITTEE ON CHARTER REFORM RECORDS 1978-1996 (BULK 1994-1995) Collection number: SFH 32: Reform highlights included shortening the 370-page document to 88 pages; modernizing the charter by eliminating sexist language, guaranteeing diversity and inclusion in city government, and protecting civil rights; merging the recorder and assessor functions; increasing government accountability; and giving some of the chief administrative officer's (CAO's) authority to the mayor while replacing the CAO with a city administrator with diminished authority.

one believes in equality, then the relative disadvantage constitutes a problem that moves from the governmental agenda to the decision agenda” (page 111).

As the so-called “policy entrepreneurs,” it is true that we were willing “to invest our resources – time energy, reputation, and sometimes money – in the hope of a future return. We captured their attention...” (page 168) and, for a disenfranchised community of artists and people of color, we felt for once we had magically made it to the “inside.”