

Step Nine of the Eightfold Path:
A Case Study of Community Engagement in Policy Analysis

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A Report to the Center on Civility & Democratic Engagement



I. Background

In 2017, a group of Goldman first-years took on a consulting project for the City of Point Arena. The students—Lauren Alexander, Anna Duning, and myself—were asked to propose policy solutions for the highprice of housing in Point Arena, a small incorporated city on the California Coast. We diligently researched our report, consulted the kinds of resources policy school teaches us to rely on, and visited Point Arena to interview stakeholders about their perspectives. While in Point Arena, we held a short town hall to gather people’s input. We completed a report, sent it to our client, and were pleased to hear that it was well-received.

This year, I reached out to the City of Point Arena and asked City Manager Richard Shoemaker if he would like to work together on another project. Together, we developed an Advanced Policy Analysis consulting project. The project included an analysis of the Point Arena Pier’s finances and policy proposals that could lead to a reduction in the cost of operating the pier for the City. I applied for funding from the Center on Civility & Democratic Engagement to support the project. In my application, I proposed visiting the City multiple times to conduct interviews, creating opportunities for direct engagement with stakeholders and for stakeholders to directly engage with each other, and a final presentation to the City Council. The Center generously agreed to fund the project.

This report is a case study of the policy analysis I completed for the City of Point Arena. It documents main findings of the report and its development. In particular, the report focuses on community engagement processes incorporated into the policy analysis. In addition, based on input from Dr. Larry Rosenthal and Dr. Daniel Lindheim, the report explores the possibility of thinking of this community engagement work as a complement to the existing Eightfold Path, a

possible ninth step in the method. This report aims to provide a glimpse into what that ninth step might consist of by reviewing the successes and failures of this particular project.

II. Method

This report followed the standard Eightfold Path process: defining the problem, assembling evidence, constructing alternatives, selecting criteria, projecting outcomes, confronting the trade-offs, deciding on a recommendation, and then telling its story.

The primary research for the report was a series of interviews with stakeholders and experts. The interviewees included: the City Manager, two city councilmembers, a commercial fisherman, a wildlife biologist, the Director of the Mendocino Local Agency Formation Commission, a harbor commissioner from another community, a professor, lawyers, consultants, and others. Additional research included analysis of the City budget, the Pier budget, and the composition of nearby special districts.

After conducting interviews, reviewing background materials, and visiting Point Arena for in-person meetings, I prepared an initial version of the report. This draft report received feedback from UC Berkeley students, professors, and from stakeholders in the Point Arena community. Following this input, I prepared a new draft with an accompanying presentation. I then shared the finalized report with the Point Arena community through a roundtable discussion and presentation to the City Council. This discussion and presentation were different from a typical Eightfold Path analysis because the focus was more on facilitating a community conversation than presenting a definite conclusion. Indeed, the ultimate recommendations of the report shifted following the first discussion with stakeholders.

III. Analysis and Alternatives

The Point Arena Pier is a 322-foot-long fishing pier that provides ocean access to a fleet of commercial and recreational fishermen. The Pier allows access to the ocean via a hoist that raises and lowers boats into the water. The City pays the cost of operating the Pier and collects revenues from its operation. These revenues are derived from fees charged at the Pier, including fees for use of the hoist and a poundage fee assessed on fish brought back over the pier. Due to difficult environmental conditions off the coast, the fish catch has substantially diminished in recent years. As a result, the Pier's revenue has declined. With declining revenue at the Pier and a steady cost of operating the Pier, the City increased its subsidy to cover the Pier's operations. This subsidy, around \$50,000, is about 15% of the City's annual budget.

The City would like to continue to support the Pier but is interested in policies that might reduce its financial obligation to the Pier. In particular, the members of the City Council consulted for this project were interested in creating a harbor district to manage the Pier. A harbor district is a local agency that provides a specialized service, similar to a school district or a water district. By creating an independent harbor district covering the area surrounding Point Arena, the City could broaden the tax base supporting the Pier and possibly increase the total revenue available to support it. As a policy analyst, I felt it would be irresponsible to only consider one alternative, because if that alternative is infeasible, then there will be no path forward for me to present to the client. I also did not want to rubber stamp a proposal that was already under consideration, without considering possible alternative routes. In discussions with experts outside the City, I identified two other alternative strategies for the Pier: increased fees for use of the Pier and the creation of a fisherman's cooperative.

In conversations with stakeholders in the community, I identified two criteria for evaluating these proposed policy alternatives: political feasibility and economic feasibility. Broadly speaking, the City Council and other members of the Point Arena community are interested in an approach to managing the Pier that will be financially sound and garner broad public support. So, following the traditional Eightfold Path process, I made predictions about the likely outcome of implementing each of the policy alternatives discussed and then weighed those outcomes using the selected criteria.

I predicted that moderate increases to fees at the Pier would reduce the City's subsidy, ensuring that the City could continue to afford to support the Pier. However, I was unsure of the political support on the City council for raising rates, even slightly, as the City substantially increased fees at the Pier not long before the project began.

I predicted that a fishermen's cooperative, if formed, would substantially reduce the cost of operating the pier. The cooperative could take over Pier operation and, by managing the Pier informally, reduce labor costs. However, I predicted that the fishermen themselves would be unlikely to support this policy as it would require substantial collaboration, and they typically work independently.

I predicted that a harbor district would garner substantial political support within the Point Arena community, but I doubted that the surrounding community would rally to support it. I also found that the upfront cost of creating a harbor district would likely be prohibitive, as the district formation process would require a CEQA analysis that could become extremely expensive.

Based on my research and conversations, I concluded that the most economically and politically feasible approach for the Pier was to slowly increase the cost of using the Pier over

time. I recommended gradually increasing rates for use of the Pier to offset the City's costs. I finished my report on the policy analysis that lead to this conclusion, developed a PowerPoint presentation to accompany it, and submitted these materials to City Manager Richard Shoemaker.

IV. Community Engagement

The Eightfold Path calls for telling your story and provides sound advice on how to present a policy analysis clearly and effectively. I did my best to follow that advice when preparing my report and PowerPoint. At the same time, I wanted to include additional community engagement in the final stage of the policy analysis process. Instead of simply giving a final statement of the result of the analysis, I wanted to hear what the stakeholders in the Point Arena community thought about the report. I was prepared to adjust my findings based on the dialogue from that engagement.

Under the guidance of City Manager Shoemaker, I returned to Point Arena and sat in on a roundtable with the commercial fishermen who, for generations, have been plying their trade from the Pier. Two councilmembers and two business owners at the Pier also participated in the conversation. Everyone present was provided with a copy of the report in advance of the meeting. During the meeting, I took notes and listened to the input and candid opinions offered by the participants on the alternatives considered. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the fishermen opposed further fee increases. The fishermen were also generally resistant to the idea of a cooperative. However, the fishermen surprised me with their support for a possible harbor district. Many, if not most, of the fishermen were enthusiastic about the idea of beginning a campaign to establish a district. Some voiced concerns about political support for the idea in the surrounding

community. For example, one fisherman shared that his brother, a parcel owner outside of Point Arena, would oppose the idea—but the general attitude was that it seemed possible.

During this listening session, I also learned more about the unique features of the Point Arena community. These features include a strong tradition of local activism and political organization, community-based resources that might energize a possible harbor district campaign, and make possible steps taken to mitigate the environmental studies required to proceed with the district formation process. This information might have come up in earlier conversations and interviews if I had brought a clearer agenda to the table or perhaps asked better questions. But much of the information shared came in response to the tone set by the report and the context that it gave to the conversation. So, it might only have been shared after the report itself was finished, even if I had taken a different approach to the policy analysis.

The next day, I presented the findings of my report to the City Council. As I gave my presentation, I took advantage of its somewhat open-ended structure to reshape my recommendations. Instead of recommending a fee increase rather than a campaign for a harbor district, I emphasized the new facts I had learned about the feasibility of a harbor district—the new evidence for the political and economic feasibility of the district that emerged through the community engagement the day before. The shift was striking to City Manager Shoemaker, who said, “I haven’t heard you speak this highly of the harbor district until now.” My perspective had shifted, due to the community listening process accompanying the report. After I presented my findings, the meeting opened to public comment. I continued to engage in dialogue with members of the community who shared questions and comments based on the report.

V. Conclusion

The Eightfold Path provides an excellent template for addressing any policy problem. At the same time, it might be possible to improve on some Eightfold Path analyses by adding a ninth step: community engagement. By listening to the stakeholders in a community that will be most impacted by a policy analysis, we can gain valuable information that might not emerge through a standard policy analysis process. In addition, adding community engagement to a policy analysis gives the community, against the backdrop of the analysis, an opportunity to develop its own solutions to the problem analyzed. . My hope is this will happen in Point Arena, and members of Point Arena community will work together to create a better and brighter future for the City.