



rRemarks Data for September 14th, 2021 Village Council Meeting

Agenda Section: *Comments of a General Nature*

Agenda Item: *N/A*

Commenter: David Rose

Comment: Data and policy making in DG

I have gradually come to appreciate that my concern over VC claiming a goal of environmental sustainability (ENVS) when it lacks both substantive meaning and metrics guiding policy is not unique to that goal. No, in fact it's the standard operating procedure for VC.

Which is to say, data and making policy have only a passing relationship with each other in VC's decision making. Data is not the basis for policy; policy ideas come first; then data, sort of, maybe.

Ideas first, sort of; then data ... maybe

In DG, policy preferences are not the basis upon which people are elected to VC. Candidates are chosen because of likability and a sense of their commitment to sustaining the extant 'blessed' way of life of DG. Some candidates may also assert a degree of vetting for having served in some village capacity or civic organization prior to running for VC.

Civic involvement in village governance is virtually non-existent, and none of the village's taxing bodies structure their operation to allow for or encourage in-depth discussion of issues among villagers outside the respective body's control. Village government then is more autocratic/oligarchic than democratic — the people serving on a taxing body 'listen' to public comments on subjects under consideration by the taxing body but feel no responsibility beyond that.

So where do policy priorities of a taxing body come from?

In a low-tax village such as VC claims DG to be, they come from deferred maintenance, and the need to find the revenue to pay for deferred maintenance.

Anything else comes largely “out of the blue,” that is, out of the pet ideas of the people elected to the body. Or they come from higher levels of government, with the local level then enforcing the policy as it sees fit.

A corollary of this approach is that a low-tax village does not believe in collecting good data because doing so costs money and because data beyond the amount of tax revenue collected is not considered particularly useful information.

Deferred maintenance may be understood then as data rearing its ugly head in a way a taxing body cannot avoid.

New policy ideas arise then neither from data nor from village-wide input and discussion. Resident input instead tends to be reactive and localized because of the impact of decisions made or under consideration by the taxing body. Typically for example, residents in a particular neighborhood voice concern about proposed new construction. Because new construction is justified as assisting in keeping property taxes low for everyone (regardless of how minuscule the effect), little to no effort is made to examine the impact of said construction on either the quality of life in the village or ENVIS more broadly.

Pet ideas

The separation of policy and data is readily apparent if one looks at the discussion of VC action items offered by commissioners at VC’s 17 Aug meeting. None of the ideas individual commissioner’s presented to add to VC’s extant list of action items had much in the way of data underpinning the reason for recommending it. Rather, each proposal constituted more a “pet idea.”

Comm Gilmarten for example put forward a “complete streets” proposal which he said would be paradigm shifting. What does that mean, in theory and in practice? Not obvious, at least to me. My further investigation revealed the phrase comes from the Department of Transportation as a way to encourage awareness of promoting health when thinking about the way people move around from place to place. The obvious question: How does a municipality undo 70 years of suburbanization of the landscape oblivious to that relationship, as one of multiple failures of urban and suburban planning oblivious to the issue of ENVIS more broadly? (More on this theme below.)

Commissioner Glover for another example asserted that data supporting his recommendation for VC allowing video gaming might exist, but the claim felt more anecdotal than one based on systematic information and analysis. His recommendation was also ‘interest driven’ but as is often the case when anyone in government makes such a proposal he portrayed its purpose as furthering a public good (more tax revenue to the VC) as well.

Tax collection is the fundamental “good” to which VC is most attentive.

The VC's action item to install license plate readers in DG preceded provision of data to VC explaining their impact and benefit as a purported crime deterrent. Does that data exist? Does it make the case? Or is the federal government simply handing out money to make well-to-do white suburbanites feel safer? As we saw with the pandemic, DG is very good at going after money the federal government hands out.

The proposed desire to build a new facility to house both VC and DG58 staffs was applauded by VC at its 10 Aug meeting as a big financial win for village residents. Since no data was provided, who knows?

Comm Hose's applause of the idea (on 17 Aug, I believe it was) was particularly notable because he claimed good government as he understands it means the less space occupied by government facilities the more space for local government to tax. Given that logic, I'm surprised he hasn't proposed VC sell all VC-owned land adjacent to the tracks and rent office space in Westmont, since as far as I can tell DG's leaders think of that village as the affordable housing section of DG.

Watch out, school district; watch out, park district. Comm Hose wants you to sell your open space. Who needs Longfellow as a public resource in DG when there's property taxes to be collected by selling it? By Hose's way of thinking, no matter how small the increment, private taxable land is always preferable to having public land. Perhaps after his term on VC ends, he'll run for park district and then angle to sell Lyman Woods; surely there's plenty of tax money to be collected putting more commercial buildings and corporate HQs on that space.

The social services coordinator idea was pushed by VC without any citation of data in the ad hoc committee's report. Rather, the report cited all the agencies offering social services but gave no indication of DG's need for such services that are not already being met. The mayor offered anecdotally that he gets calls all the time asking for help, so I guess we are supposed to give the benefit of the doubt. I await data about what services the new coordinator will provide beyond that which a webpage showing the report's compilation of agencies and contacts might offer. I'm not saying the need for a coordinator does not exist, though I suspect the need is far greater outside DG than in. I'm simply observing that the data to justify VC decisions and action items is being collected after the fact.

What threshold of need will determine continuing or ending having a social services coordinator on staff?

Side question: Will the new coordinator's services be available to those in DG only? If not, who then helps the homeless in DG?

EDC plan report

We see the separation of policy and data in the 10 Aug presentation by the EDC of its 'plan' for the coming years.

Four elements from its proposal are especially noteworthy.

One, the economic data included was data collected by others, not by the EDC. For as long as EDC has existed (since 2006), apparently it has not collected systematic data, a point I called to the VC's attention earlier this year, and which the mayor has apparently passed along.

Thus, in spite of the claim EDC is driving economic development in DG, there is literally no data to support such a claim. I'm not saying economic development as VC defines it has not occurred; I am saying EDC has not shown its contribution was instrumental or pivotal to the economic evolution that has occurred.

Notably absent from EDC is any data on business turnover. EDC's focus has been on 'wins' — businesses newly locating to DG — and VC's attention is more than willing to be drawn to that. But as data providing a sense of the overall situation, wins are of little value. You don't know how good you are if you're not tracking wins, losses, and retentions. The more granular by business type, the better, I would think.

Two, little of the data presented in the EDC report was of a quality to be useful. The county data on visitors for example might be interesting but, as presented, it was hardly granular enough to be of much value to any municipality within the county. Is DG a tourist destination? Because of what attractions? The data certainly does not suggest.

Three, regarding EDC's discussion of promoting retail activity in certain corridors, the obvious question is whether one should believe in a supply-driven notion of increased economic activity. Unless one does, then enhancing underperforming corridors means simply drawing business away from elsewhere, including within DG itself. In the absence of data, who knows? [This point applies also to Glover's concern about diminishing restaurant traffic.]

But lacking data, it begs the question why under capitalism those in the public sector have decided providing tax breaks is the preferred way to learn if a need actually exists in contrast to the more environmentally friendly approach of determining need before wasting financial and material resources. Of course, since that linkage is not part of VC's understanding of ENVS, one may assume this observation is as unintelligible to VC as someone speaking in a foreign language.

Four, and perhaps most importantly, the most useful data presented in the EDC report refutes the claim EDC is a public-private partnership of any significant involvement. Why do I say this? For two reasons. First, because among the village's over 4000 businesses, less than about 50 — ONE PERCENT!!— believe enough in EDC's work to pay money to the organization to become one of its so-called "investors!" And of those 'investing,' the average is at the second lowest of the four available levels of membership! Second, not surprisingly then, the bulk of the money for EDC's operation comes from public sources, including directly from VC coffers last year because of the pandemic-caused drop in hotel tax revenue available to EDC. As the

presentation revealed, the EDC's very existence is threatened unless it can keep getting public money, either from the village's non-hotel tax and/or from grant money EDC hopes to get by setting up a foundation. Grants of course are essentially another form of the accounting sleight of hand local government favors to hide their shortfall in locally generated revenue, a tactic municipalities who have a relative superior capacity to generate tax revenue nevertheless use without shame.

Given that lack of private sector involvement then, one cannot help but wonder to what extent ANY of the report's sectoral discussions reflect sentiment within the DG business community as a whole or the DG community. Of the 60 or so people listed as interviewees for the report, about 20% were public officials. How many of the rest were local business people with no prior affiliation with EDC? Is it more than rhetorical to ask if EDC has EVER surveyed the community in a scientifically sound way for any reason whatsoever? In other words, how much of what EDC reported as a "plan TO the VC" is simply a "plan OF the VC?"

Did any of the VC call attention to this charade during EDC's presentation? Not at all, quite the opposite. As usual, they were gushing in their praise.

Which means VC is willing to divert nearly \$400,000 in public money to pay salaries and benefits of a three-person operation of little demonstrable value other than its purported but unsubstantiated claim it calls DG to the attention of municipality-shopping business enterprises. "Attention" meaning signaling to said shoppers DG is a place where VC is quite willing to give tax breaks and subsidies — I love the euphemism "tools" in this context — if the business will only choose DG as the place to re/locate. Given the public subsidies already available to business in the form of the rail system and highways DG's location offers and the subsidies going to the electricity system in IL, the need for DG to offer even more subsidies simply reinforces what a tax mess IL state government and the US federal government have created for them/ourselves.

Little wonder then VC does not want the public asking questions of the EDC when its head gives his quarterly report to VC.

Forest and Prairie

We also see the data-policy separation problem in the discussion of the Forest-Prairie intersection.

Based on the exchanges and presentations in VC meetings, three matters are of concern: accidents at the intersection, traffic volume on Forest between Prairie and Franklin, and traffic speed in that block.

On the third matter, I heard/saw little in the way of data. On the second, data in terms of a gross count was shown. But if data of a more precise nature exists— such as direction of travel and time of day — I did not see it presented.

On the first, the intersection accidents, a count of the total number and the direction of travel of vehicles involved over a six year period of time (to Apr 2021) was presented. Beyond that, no further information was given.

Why is that relevant? For one, because line of sight was raised as a factor contributing to accidents. But from the data, four of the 24 accidents involved cars southbound on Forest, for which no connection to line of sight was ever asserted as a contributing factor. (According to the tabular form in which the data were presented, there were no accidents involving vehicles going in opposing directions on Forest or in opposing directions on Prairie.)

The most frequent number of accidents, in which line of sight may have been a factor, involved vehicles heading north on Forest. But not presented was any further substantive information about the accidents: time of day and date, weather, northbound driver's 'intention,' Prairie driver's intention, traffic volume at the time, severity ... as in injuries resulting. There is a known line of sight problem for the northbound driver looking west; is there also one looking to the east? That is, does a traffic backup at eastbound Prairie present a line of sight problem for northbound drivers looking east before trying to turn left to head west on Prairie or to cross Prairie? No data was offered on that score.

Nor was data presented allowing comparison with the preceding period of similar duration.

Absent that kind of information, I am hard-pressed to gauge how one arrives at an appropriate solution that reduces accidents while allowing for optimal traffic flow.

And while residents voiced concern over pedestrian safety, no data was provided on that subject either.

In fact, close scrutiny of the discussion suggests accidents are not the prime issue. Rather, residents' vehement rejection of making the intersection a four-way stop compared to their preference of shutting access to Forest from Prairie strongly suggests they are less concerned about accidents at the intersection and more concerned about reducing traffic volume on their block. (This overlaps their disappointment with the village's prior action of prohibiting left turns from westbound Prairie onto Forest. No data was provided regarding the extent to which accidents at the intersection involve the prohibited left turns. Nor was any data provided on the extent to which (frequency, time of day, etc.) such prohibited turns occur.)

Problem is, as discussion acknowledged: what residents deem a solution for their block — closing the block off to through-traffic — has impact elsewhere.

And while VC officials express great sympathy for Forest residents' predicament, VC's predicament is VC doesn't have ANY simple, inexpensive solution ... because the fundamental reason for the traffic problem is obvious: too much traffic at certain times of day, especially 'rush

hours,' when street traffic congestion overlaps increased commuter train traffic, AND Main St is not configured to handle the volume at all.

As almost everyone in the village likely knows, Forest effectively serves as the second lane of Main St for crossing the railroad tracks in that stretch of Main where lanes shrink from two to one in each direction.

The volume of traffic has to go somewhere and VC thus far is willing to leave it on Forest north of Franklin.

Somewhat ironically, in the portion of the 03 Aug VC meeting involving the DMG and EDC plans, Comm K proposed a hypothetical 'development idea' for the "downtown section" of Forest which would further VC's goal of increasing tax revenue. That K's pet idea would add even more traffic to Forest was not mentioned!

Indeed, the traffic volume problem, one can readily argue, is of VC's own making: VC promotes downtown as a destination for the village as a whole. VC has promoted increasing the population of DG as a whole which undoubtedly adds to traffic crossing the tracks, including during rush hour. And perhaps most importantly of all, VC has promoted increased density of residents living in the downtown area itself, including in its most recent decision to add even more units to that number.

So if you think traffic is out of control, look no further than the VC's policies to understand one of the major reasons why. Did VC take traffic into account in its economic development work for downtown?

If it did, I hear few VC members or staff referring back to the predicted effects on traffic volume and patterns, and assessing the extent to which those predictions bore out.

"Good enough"

What do residents make of this disconnect between policy and data? For the most part, very little. Unless and until it affects them personally, as in the case of Forest and Prairie.

In DG, to repeat taxing bodies operate essentially as autocracy/oligarchy with little to no public involvement most of the time.

This point is evident with respect to VC when one examines closely the explicit and implicit messages in VC's discussion about its procedures, mislabeled "rules of governance" (11 July meeting) and its relationship with and use of boards and commissions (10 Aug meeting). Review of the video of the two meetings suggests neither discussion was of sufficient interest to the public that anyone stuck around to listen and/or comment.

The takeaway from VC's discussions? VC is fine with the way things operate as they do because VC wants to retain tight control of the reins of power.

Conveniently, the pandemic has provided VC with even more justification to provide minimal opportunity for public involvement.

But the more long-lasting mechanism of control and issue avoidance is VC's commitment to low property taxes and related dependence on fluctuating revenue from other taxes. Together they create the very convenient rationalization that VC can do little beyond what VC currently does because it doesn't have the staff to do more.

VC doesn't go looking for 'trouble' (new policy ideas) and does its best to keep 'trouble' from finding it. During VC's 11 Jul discussion of commissioner reports, Comm K pointed out the all-too-obvious — the council has no mechanism for dealing with controversial matters. Did his observation generate follow-up comment and interest in how VC might address this important void? Not at all. Why not? Because the void is a feature, not a bug.

Controversy endangers the atmosphere/illusion of collegiality VC wants to maintain both within its own ranks and in the village. Anything that might be controversial, such as making ENV5 a real village-wide goal, is avoided like the plague.

VC vests in itself sole responsibility to determine which are the issues worthy of its attention on the presumption that as elected officials only they have the right. As is the case generally in the US, government in the form of VC acts only after a threshold of embarrassment or duress has been crossed.

Until the pandemic hit, it was politically safer to be surprised by events and react than to be proactive. Indeed, it's safe to say that had a board in 2019 urged VC examine village preparedness for a pandemic, the board would have been ignored, perhaps even laughed at, or chastised for stepping out of line.

For that matter, rather than see the pandemic as shifting the paradigm of 'normal,' the political preference including within VC and village staff is to treat it as a one-off anomaly that we simply need get passed and return to the pre-pandemic 'normal.'

Sadly, VC's commitment to low property taxes leaves the village residents quite exposed to the impact of paradigm shifts. It's the prime reason VC has had so much difficulty finding a reliable way to finance a new village hall and police station. It hopes to act before the "ground" shifts again.

So let's be clear: VC's commitment to low property taxes results in hidden taxes and other 'costs' we residents pay because pet ideas precede data, often proceed without data, and can even remain in place regardless of data.

As long as VC prides itself in running a tight financial ship, one that is subject to little public involvement and scrutiny, collecting good data will be seen as it has been in past and remains to this day ... too expensive. Not really necessary.

This is the reason the standard for government work at all levels in the US, but especially at the local level, is “good enough.”

“Good enough” to VC should be understood as short for “good enough to get me re-elected” and “good enough for the time being.” Or as what government officials mean when they use the word so trendy these days — “sustainable.”

In a municipality like DG, one that fancies itself an example — indeed, a bastion — of all good things possible thanks to American democratic capitalism, do citizens want to hear their way of life — the American way of life — is not ENVIS? That their good life is based on the exploitation of others? Do they want to hear they are totally dependent on their energy-slaves and need to begin to give them up?

These are ideas not to be uttered in polite company, let alone at VC or other village taxing body meetings.

As VC has made abundantly clear, notions like that don't get you elected or reelected in places like DG.

For that reason, I predict VC will NEVER hire a staff person responsible for ENVIS because — if s/he had a shred of professional, intellectual, and moral integrity — such a person would make many of the same points I have been making in my various comments these past years regarding the woefully inadequate steps VC is taking vis-a-vis its purported goal of being a steward of ENVIS.

When it comes to ENVIS, however, the standard “good enough” is not fungible. Unfortunately, as the ultimate deferred maintenance problem, ENVIS will remain of little concern to residents of DG and to VC until ENVIS manifests either as existential local problems DG can not avoid or as larger problems that finally generate edicts from higher levels of government DG and other lower levels of government will be tasked to implement as their contribution to the solution.

These past several years have demonstrated quite unequivocally VC and VM have neither the intellectual bandwidth nor the political courage to act in any other way.

So how do we get out of the mess we have created for ourselves when we refuse to address the key question: If ENVIS, capitalism, and democracy are not compatible, which one(s) do Americans hold on to and which do they/we give up?

This is clearly NOT a rhetorical question.

