

# **Transition Initiatives and Confrontational Politics: Guidelines, Opportunities, and Practices**

Presented at the *Western Political Science Association 2016 Annual Meeting*,  
San Diego, California, March 24, 2016

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# Transition Initiatives and Confrontational Politics: Guidelines, Opportunities, and Practices

Transition movement analysts have coalesced around an understanding that the movement and its initiatives avoid confrontation and practice a secessionist or apolitical development strategy. This paper challenges this characterization by exploring the political engagement guidelines offered by the movement's leadership and the actions taken by various Transition initiatives implementing those guidelines in the United States. Through archival research, interviews, participant observation, and a national survey, the analysis reveals opportunities and numerous examples where initiatives lobby, influence, and directly govern local public decision-making institutions, sometimes to great effect. This indicates that Transition initiatives in the United States are willing to pursue confrontational politics when necessary and appropriate. The analysis illuminates nuances in the movement's political practice and offers insight into pragmatic choices that initiatives make in their local communities. The analysis also shows that in certain instances, depending on context, a fully secessionist strategy is less effective and perhaps even regressive.

## Introduction

There is a longstanding, ongoing debate over the most appropriate and effective political strategy for social movements to catalyze change and generate positive social and environmental outcomes (Gamson 1990, Meyer and Tarrow 1998, Amenta *et al.* 2010, Meyer 2014). This debate, when reduced to its most simplistic distillation, is typically framed as a binary choice between two alternative approaches. One approach argues that it is imperative for movements to assume a radical posture and remain functionally autonomous and independent of institutionalized governance structures. Steeped in the tradition of communitarian anarchism, social ecology, and related horizontal forms of political organization, this do-it-ourselves collectivist strategy argues that powerful elites

and hierarchal forces invariably co-opt and stunt the development of organic, evolutionary livelihoods that are necessary for human and environmental flourishing (Bookchin 1982, Fotopoulos 1997, Scott 1998). The alternative strategy, based on theories of pluralism and more equal distributions of power, calls for social movements to acknowledge and embrace institutional governance and administrative frameworks, mobilize resources from the inside, and challenge and confront structural barriers to change. Seeking to work within and alongside powerful political authorities while simultaneously hoping to generate enough influence and political will to generate shifts in public policy, advocates of this approach argue that rather than being a barrier to improved livelihoods and civic expression, engaging with formal governance structures enhances democracy, improves social and environmental performance, and addresses seemingly intractable problems more effectively and efficiently (Bullard and Johnson 2000, Paehlke and Torgerson 2005). In this paper, I use the nomenclature of Myers and Sbicca (2015) who refer to these two political engagement strategies as ‘secessionist politics’ and ‘confrontational politics’ respectively.<sup>1</sup>

Scholarly investigations of secessionist and confrontational politics are frequently conducted at the macro-level, yet this scale of analysis becomes problematic with decentralized movements where united subgroups are free – and perhaps even encouraged –

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<sup>1</sup> The expression ‘confrontational politics’ signifies hostility, opposition, and struggle between civil society groups and local governments. In the present analysis, I expand and broaden this political engagement strategy by incorporating less aggressive dimensions of political practice. In my usage, confrontational politics signifies respect, accommodation, and cooperation between politically engaged groups, in addition to the adversarial elements that are commonly associated with the term.

to perform context-specific and place-based political action. Variation can occur when disaggregated groups receive such encouragement from movement leaders and implement general political engagement guidelines locally. In these instances, analyzing and drawing uniform conclusions on the political identity of the movement renders it monolithic and occludes place-based innovations and practices (Andrews and Edwards 2005).

In this paper I explore how individual community-level groups representing a larger grassroots eco-social movement navigate the contentious terrain between independent and institutional action. Specifically, I investigate the political engagement strategies of groups implementing the Transition movement community development model in the United States. These geographically dispersed community groups, called initiatives, are all united and motivated by a relatively uniform definition of the causes and consequences of the important problems facing local communities, the environment, and the global economy. Initiatives receive guidance from the movement's leadership on recommended community development practices, including suggestions for interfacing with local governments and staying within moderately defined boundaries of secessionist and confrontational politics. Where initiatives differ is in their opportunities for addressing those problems locally and their practices to do so. By shifting the unit of analysis from the movement as a whole to the initiatives, this inquiry offers insights into the practical and pragmatic choices initiatives make in the real world regarding political engagement strategies. The research also reveals latent nuance to Transition movement politics, which is frequently and universally characterized as secessionist in orientation. Furthermore, the analysis deepens our understanding of the relevant trade-offs between secessionist and confrontational

approaches at the local level, and it suggests that a fully secessionist strategy can precipitate regressive outcomes.

### **The Transition movement**

The Transition movement (or simply Transition) began in 2005 with an ambitious, citizen-led effort to prepare the Totnes, England community for the non-negotiable impacts of depleted and expensive fossil fuels coupled with a changed climate. According to the movement's participants, the implication of peak oil and climate change is that the global economy will become increasingly volatile and dysfunctional, eventually resulting in significant disruptions to economic supply chains and the transportation of goods. This poses a direct threat to the long-term stability of communities who are completely dependent upon the continual movement of consumer goods flowing through the fossil fueled global economic system. To confront the peak oil and climate change challenge, the wider movement and its place-based initiatives value prefigurative practice at the community level (Hardt 2013, North and Longhurst 2013). The Transition model emphasizes the importance of grassroots social innovation and action for local community development, with a particular focus on the spatial and material downsizing of production and consumption cycles and a reweaving of interpersonal relations between community members (Bailey *et al.* 2010, Cato and Hillier 2010, Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012). The objective of each initiative is to build and exercise local capacity for self-reliance, effectively disentangling communities from the global economic systems that remain vulnerable to climate change and scarce and expensive fossil fuels. In practice, this is frequently expressed through context and initiative-specific projects such as peer-to-peer Time Banking systems, community gardening, local currencies, and the sharing of practical

skills. A count in November 2014 revealed nearly 1,200 initiatives in forty-three countries and at the time of writing, there are 159 officially recognized initiatives in the United States (Transition Network 2014, Transition US 2015).

The Transition movement strongly encourages all participants to become actively involved in co-creating and developing the type of low-energy, resilient, and economically localized community that can survive the inevitable impacts of peak oil and climate change. Rob Hopkins (2013), who is the movement's core founder and undoubtedly its leading and best known spokesperson, titled his recent book *The Power of Just Doing Stuff*. The book is a rallying cry to citizens everywhere to self-organize and get on with the necessary and immediate task of prefiguratively co-creating the future. There is, therefore, a decisively strong undercurrent of do-it-ourselves collectivism and secessionist politics embedded within the Transition movement and its initiatives. At the same time, there are practical limitations to 'just doing stuff' in communities where the Transition model takes root. Initiatives form in municipalities governed by local councils, and they are subject to local, as well as supra-local policies that regulate, incentivize, and limit certain community development practices. A secessionist political strategy would avoid shifting the policy framework and would suggest action within these parameters. Alternatively, a confrontational strategy would directly attempt to modify and shape this policy environment in a way that promotes desired development outcomes while avoiding undesirable ones.

Given these competing demands, the Transition movement has been subjected to numerous political analyses and scholars and critics have weighed in on its political practice. Many analyses are single case studies, or 'backyard ethnographies' (Heley 2011).

For instance, Neal (2013) concludes that Transition is ‘post-political’ after interviewing individuals from three initiatives. Without conducting an interview or a survey, Chatterton and Cutler (2008) conclude that Transition is ‘depoliticized.’ In a blog post, Rotherham (2013) writes about his involvement with Transition City Lancaster and determines that Transition is a ‘non-political’ movement. Similarly, Smith (2011) characterizes the movement as ‘unpolitical’ following her experience with Transition Nottingham. Mason and Whitehead (2012a) investigate the practices of the Aberystwyth initiative and characterize Transition as ‘apolitical.’<sup>2</sup> Schneider-Mayerson (2013) merges Transition with the wider peak oil movement to describe its ‘political quiescence.’ These analyses share two common features: first they are built upon a very small sampling of local initiatives, and second, they characterize the Transition movement as predisposed to secessionist politics.

This commonly-held interpretation of the movement’s politics warrants scrutiny and deeper investigation because Transition initiatives are intentionally designed to create space for social innovation and adaptive learning (Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012). Consequently, political practices could vary greatly between initiatives. Is the Transition movement’s

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<sup>2</sup> Mason and Whitehead’s (2012a) ‘apolitical’ conclusion is surprising considering the authors were involved in Transition Heathrow’s Grow Heathrow climate activist camp (Mason and Whitehead 2012b). Grow Heathrow was created by the Transition Heathrow initiative in 2010 as a squatter settlement on abandoned land that contained derelict greenhouses. The land was scheduled for tarmacking as part of Heathrow Airport’s expansion. Transition Heathrow’s intent is to protest the building of the third runway and simultaneously redevelop the land and create a space for resilience- and community-building activities. On July 8, 2015, the camp’s activists successfully resisted forced eviction for the second time and continue their occupation in spite of losing a lengthy court battle (Gums 2015).

political engagement strategy as uniformly secessionist as existing studies conclude, or is it more diverse and confrontational?

### **Research methods**

The present analysis of the Transition movement's political engagement strategies in the United States is complimentary to a comprehensive research effort that investigated the interface between US Transition initiatives and the practice of urban and town planning (Barnes 2015a). I conducted extensive archival research on the Transition movement that included official publications as well as blogs, forums, and online debates by members and commentators. This archival research was necessary to identify the movement's stated – though not necessarily implemented – political engagement guidelines for its initiatives.

Actual political engagement strategies implemented by initiatives in practice were gleaned through several data gathering techniques. First, participant observation was used as a data collection method. For the last three years, I participated in a local initiative by attending numerous meetings and events, becoming involved in strategic planning, and participating in and leading skill-sharing workshops. In addition to the field memos generated through participant observation, data was collected through twelve semi-structured interviews with Transition volunteers in six separate initiatives, each interview lasting approximately two hours. One series of interview questions asked about the initiatives' context-specific community development projects and activities, their administrative techniques for executing these projects, and what the challenges and opportunities were to interacting with local governments and planners. Further data was obtained through a survey of initiatives. I received the results of the 2014 annual survey conducted by Transition US, the national coordinating hub for the Transition movement in



the United States. This online survey was distributed via newsletters, Facebook, and email to all Transition initiatives in the United States, and it was designed to collect information on the independent projects initiatives were undertaking as well as the opportunities for Transition US to assist in those efforts. However, three open-ended survey questions asked if initiatives influenced local policy or legislation, actively engaged with local government, and whether or not initiative members serve on local councils, planning commissions, task forces, boards, and committees. At the time of survey, there were 151 officially certified initiatives and forty-eight responded, giving a response rate of 32%. In several instances, emails were sent to representatives of initiatives to clarify and amplify their answers recorded on the survey. The NVivo software package was used to organize and code the data for thematic analysis (Guest *et al.* 2012, Bazeley and Jackson 2013).

### **The Transition movement's political engagement guidelines for initiatives**

Transition initiatives are asked to maintain a tenuous and delicate relationship with local governments. Rob Hopkins, who is frequently looked upon by initiatives and their volunteers for guidance on how to implement the Transition model, including strategies for navigating the political realm of government, recognizes the tension between secessionist and confrontational politics by writing, 'the degree to which Transition operates in parallel to, or engages with, local authorities is a subject for debate' (Hopkins 2010, p. 257). He, as well as other influential figures in the movement, have spent a great deal of time and energy writing about and refining suggested guidelines for initiatives to follow, the results of which are summarized below.

When the movement's guiding document, *The Transition Handbook*, was published in 2008, the suggested interface between initiatives and their local government was

characterized through a bridge metaphor – initiatives should look to ‘build a bridge to local government.’ This implies connection and engagement between initiatives and local governments, rather than the creation of parallel or shadow governance systems. The orientation toward confrontational politics was further rationalized by Hopkins (2008a, p. 170) who wrote:

Whatever the degree of groundswell your Transition Initiative manages to generate, however many practical projects you manage to get going on the ground... you will not progress very far unless you have cultivated a positive and productive relationship with your local authority. Whether it is planning issues, funding issues or whatever, you need them on board.

In his doctoral thesis completed two years after the publication of the *Handbook*, Hopkins (2010, p. 255) expanded upon and went into greater detail on degrees of political engagement strategies between initiatives and local government. He wrote that there are four possibilities that ‘are not mutually exclusive [and] indeed ideally would all occur simultaneously.’ The spectrum includes, in increasingly active approaches: lead by example, build bridges, support local authorities, and engage with policy-making. Leading by example is the most secessionist of the four strategies and involves initiatives and their volunteers practicing sustainable, low-carbon living and creating community development projects that could be adopted by local governments and implemented on a larger scale. Building bridges simply means introducing the initiative to the local government, and keeping them abreast of the initiative’s practices in the municipality. Supporting local authorities involves initiatives making an effort to educate governing authorities on the causes and consequences of climate change and peak oil, and to build their policy and administrative capacity for responding to the threats. At the confrontational end of the

spectrum, engaging in policy-making sees initiatives becoming actively involved in the policy process, whether through the creation of local development plans that can be presented to councils and administrators, directly advocating for the adoption and implementation of low-carbon programs, and mobilizing resources to get Transition activists elected or appointed to local councils and commissions (Hopkins 2008a, 2010). This most confrontational political strategy was further endorsed by the movement when its press published a local government guide for initiatives (Rowell 2010). The document, written by a Transition participant and former council member of the London Borough of Camden, advises initiatives on techniques for influencing local policies and it contains a chapter entitled ‘Getting Elected’ for individuals who are motivated to seek political positions within their local authorities.

Yet despite these guidelines for how to engage local governments – whether simply by demonstrating best practices in low-carbon living or through direct policy advocacy – there is a considerable amount of tension in the movement and individual initiatives as to the extent of that relationship (Felicetti 2013, Barnes 2015b). Since Transition’s founding, Hopkins (2008a, p. 144) has consistently and repeatedly stated that initiatives should engage local governments ‘on their own terms’ and only to the point where local authorities are able to ‘support, not drive’ initiatives. A comfortable separation between initiatives and their local authorities is seen as a minimum requirement for practicing grassroots action and leading by example. There is, therefore, a level of autonomy that initiatives aim to preserve and they actively refrain from becoming institutionalized and subject to powerful political winds (Poyourow 2010). Part of the motivation for remaining independent is the perception that local governments are frequently bogged down by bureaucratic

administrations, are slow to act, and problems such as climate change demand a more nimble and rapid response. The often-cited ‘Cheerful Disclaimer’ for the movement argues that ‘if we wait for governments, it will be too little, too late.’ Engaging with local governments can slow an initiative down, or as one interviewee noted, Transition initiatives work well when they are independent of governments because:

The emphasis is on grassroots. It’s a group of people that decide to do it. So you don’t have to wait for the government, you don’t have to get anybody’s approval.... You just start with that small group of people and they create the initiative.

Another motivation for remaining autonomous is the fear of political and economic forces capturing and controlling the actions of an initiative, and potentially re-orienting them away from community action on peak oil and climate change. Power inequalities between initiatives and their local authorities are real and perceived. This skeptical perspective was offered by an interviewee in a newly formed initiative who, when asked about the possible value and role of government, responded:

On the one hand they may be able to help us grow. On the other hand, if we grow it, they may just want to co-opt it. So before we try to look for a stamp of approval or work with the government overtly, I want to make sure that we’ve actually got something that has enough integrity that it won’t be co-opted.

A third and major motivating factor for autonomous, independent action stems from the movement’s desire to make the Transition model attractive to all segments of the political spectrum, not just the obvious low-hanging fruit of the environmental left. In response to a critique of the Transition model written by Paul Chatterton and Alice Cutler (2008), who asserted that initiatives should articulate and practice a much more radical

politics targeting systemic transformations to political and economic structures, Hopkins (2008b) wrote, ‘I make no apologies for the Transition approach being designed to appeal as much to the Rotary Club and the Women’s Institute as to the authors of this report.’ The reasoning Hopkins (2011a) employs for his stance is that peak oil and climate change are non-discriminatory and will impact everyone, thus anyone who wishes to participate in community action against these threats should have the opportunity and space to do so. Conflict and hostility, especially with local governments, encloses those spaces and leads to fractured and divided communities. This can cause backlash against initiatives and undermine the credibility and moral force of more moderate elements who are gently pushing local governments for change, what is popularly known as the ‘radical flank effect’ (Haines 1984). Political conflict also alienates people who are drawn to Transition for its positive vision and message of ‘applied optimism,’ making it more difficult for initiatives to attract, recruit, and retain volunteers (Hopkins 2008a, Harré 2011). Consequently, any time criticism is leveled against the secessionist dimension of the Transition model, Hopkins (2008b, 2009, 2011b, 2014a, 2014b) has made a repeated and concerted effort to control the political engagement message by consistently reminding initiatives to avoid crossing the boundary into protest politics and more radical forms of direct action.

This analysis of the Transition movement’s political engagement guidelines indicates that initiatives are asked to walk a fine line by the movement’s leadership. Initiatives are advised to pursue a confrontational strategy by seeking institutional support and, when appropriate, advocating for policy change, while at the same time they are asked to avoid alienating supporters and protect their ability to practice do-it-ourselves development. This tension in political engagement guidance indicates that Transition

initiatives must work to find a delicate balance of competing demands and expectations when it comes to interfacing with local governments. It also indicates that actual political engagement strategies practiced by initiatives lie somewhere between secession and confrontation.

### **The risk of secessionist politics**

The movement's leadership is explicit about the dangers of pursuing confrontational politics. Being slowed down, co-opted, and socially divisive are all valid concerns. Yet when Transition initiatives engage in fully secessionist politics, effectively pursuing a do-it-ourselves community development strategy that operates parallel to institutionalized governance structures, they must confront a number of unfortunate realities and potential weaknesses in their approach. First, the concept of 'lock-in' becomes highly relevant when a municipality chooses a development direction that makes it more difficult to achieve resiliency and sustainability in the future (Wilson 2012). Land use and policy decisions that degrade local environments, drive wedges into productive community relations, and limit a community's capacity to adapt to threats posed by peak oil and climate change will intensify vulnerabilities and propel communities down undesirable pathways. If a Transition initiative elects to take a hands-off approach to institutional governance and practice secessionist politics, it must trust, hope, or assume that local decision-makers and administrators will make choices that avoid negative lock-in effects. The risks associated with this approach are clear. Local decision-makers could, whether knowingly or unwittingly, make development choices that restrict a community's ability to achieve an advanced state of resiliency and environmental performance.

A second and related weakness that accompanies the secessionist political engagement strategy is the intentional self-limiting application of decision-making power that could be productively and effectively applied to the wider community (Sawyers and Meyer 1999). Local governments possess municipal bonding and taxing authority, as well as the right to accumulate large amounts of financial resources for public expenditures in areas of interest to Transition initiatives. For instance, local governments can use their fiscal authority to create low-carbon transportation infrastructure such as bicycle lanes or renewable energy and energy efficiency upgrades to the existing building stock. Local governments also set policies and administer public services that are relevant to advancing sustainable practices and outcomes, for example waste collection and recycling, stormwater and wastewater management, parks and recreational activities, building codes and ordinances, and historic and cultural preservation (Allison and Peters 2011, Wheeler 2013). When local governments use these fiscal and policy powers wisely to improve resiliency and low-carbon living, the impacts extend to cover the entire community. By comparison, Transition initiatives practicing secessionist politics are clearly unable to match the scope and scale of outcomes achievable by focused application of institutional power.

Considering the movement's range of recommended strategies for how to engage local governing bodies, as well as the significant risks and weaknesses intrinsic to the secessionist political strategy, one would expect to discover instances where initiatives practice a more confrontational approach. These initiatives would represent counter examples to the frequently expressed characterization of 'post-political,' 'depoliticized,' 'non-political,' 'unpolitical,' and 'apolitical' community development practice embodied by secessionist politics.

## **Transition initiatives practicing confrontational politics**

The data collected through archival research, observation, interviews, and the survey shows that a number of initiatives in the United States engage in confrontational politics, with some practicing more oppositional tactics than others. To demonstrate this case, I provide examples where initiatives seize opportunities to follow Hopkins' (2008a, 2010, p. 255) fourth and most confrontational political strategy. Specifically, this strategy calls for active engagement in opportunities for local policy-making, whether by having Transition activists serve on local councils and public service bodies, through the creation or influencing of local development plans that could be adopted by councils, or through direct lobbying and advocacy in support of policy change.

### ***Serving on councils and public service bodies***

The responses to the 2014 Transition US survey provide clear evidence that many members of Transition initiatives hold various positions in local office. Of the forty-eight officially certified initiatives that responded to the 2014 survey, eleven groups reported that at least one of their active members occupies a seat on their local council.<sup>3</sup> The survey also revealed that there are three mayors and one state-level senator who participate in their local initiative. During the series of interviews, an interviewee noted that members of her initiative turned out en masse on Election Day and voted decisively for a Transition ally who was running for local office, propelling the candidate to victory. Another interviewee successfully ran for an open seat on his local council and justified his campaign for office

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<sup>3</sup> Hopkins (2010, p. 261) writes that two active members of Transition Town Totnes serve on Totnes Town Council



by stating:

The voluntary stuff is great, but I don't think you have to choose between [that and government]. I think the voluntary stuff naturally leads into working with government. And yeah, you can work with government only from the outside, but why? Plenty of other people are not working with government only from the outside. Developers aren't doing it that way. They back candidates for local government when they need to do so. And when they don't like a candidate, they'll try and get them out. Why should they work with local government from the inside and Transition should be hands off?

In addition to the initiative participants who are local council members and mayors, the 2014 survey revealed that twenty-four initiatives have at least one active member volunteering on formal, local government public service bodies. For instance, Transition activists are serving on peak oil task forces, climate action committees and coalitions, transportation commissions, planning commissions, water boards, neighborhood councils, environmental task forces, shade tree commissions, environmental advisory councils, sustainability committees, citizen's advisory councils, composting working groups, complete streets coalitions, energy conservation commissions, bicycle and pedestrian advisory panels, community services commissions, transit working groups, and food policy councils. The interviewee quoted above created a food policy council once in office and populated one quarter of it with fellow Transitioners.

### ***Influencing local development plans***

A major project that all Transition initiatives are strongly encouraged to complete is the crafting and implementation of a wide-ranging plan for the community to reduce energy consumption, enhance resiliency, and prepare for the impacts of peak oil and climate change. In the early years of the movement, these documents were commonly referred to

as Energy Descent Action Plans, but that title has since been broadened to incorporate other aspects of community development such as resiliency, local economies, and disaster preparedness. In the United States, only two Transition initiatives – Transition Fidalgo & Friends (Anacortes, WA) and Transition Montpelier (Montpelier, VT) – fully developed one of these plans. A less resource-intensive approach to long-term planning that many initiatives take is member mobilization and participation in formal planning processes with local governments, urban planners, and emergency managers, all in an effort to influence the scope and scale of government-sponsored plans.

Transition Fidalgo and Friends embarked on a year-long process to research and write their document named *Vision 2030*. The fifteen year plan for Anacortes covers topics such as economic localization, renewable energy, local food, affordable housing, preservation of local natural resources, and low-carbon transportation, and it offers land use strategies for how to achieve the goals set out for each topic. A co-author of *Vision 2030* noted that one year prior to the release of plan, the community's municipal government announced that they would undertake comprehensive planning efforts and said:

That was something that certainly spurred us forward on this project, so that we could use it to help inform the comp plan process. We shared the document with our city council and new mayor, as well as with the planning commission and department. In fact, when one of us went to the planning department to deliver a print copy, he found that they had already downloaded it from the website, which we took as a very good sign... Many of us have joined in the community input sessions that have been held to help shape the comp plan, and we've gotten the resiliency message out there.

A number of initiatives have similarly engaged in various public participation opportunities during local comprehensive planning efforts. Transition Town Media (Media, PA) members attended and voiced opinions at visioning sessions and focus groups

organized by a planning consultant. These efforts were reflected in the final comprehensive plan which made recommendations to install a system of bicycle lanes in the borough and make public land available to Transition Town Media for use as a permaculture garden. Transition Venice (Venice, FL), Transition PDX (Portland, OR), Greening Greenfield (Greenfield, MA), Local2020 (Port Townsend, WA), and Transition Asheville (Asheville, NC) were also active participants during local comprehensive planning efforts in their municipalities.

Beyond the public participation opportunities open during comprehensive planning, some initiatives are involved in other, related long-term planning efforts. For instance, Transition PDX created PREP Oregon, an emergency planning and preparedness coalition comprised of private citizens, community groups, and local government agencies such as first responders and emergency management bureaus. The group also gave extensive input and feedback on drafts of the city's climate change action plan. Members of Transition Longfellow (Minneapolis, MN) participated in public meetings on their city's urban agriculture plan. Transition Asheville was an active voice in shaping GroWNC, a regional plan for development in Western North Carolina. Transition Pasadena (Pasadena, CA) submitted public comments, attended planning meetings, and urged the city's Urban Forestry Advisory Council to incorporate fruit trees into the update of their Urban Forestry Plan.

### ***Lobbying for policy change***

Many Transition initiatives in the United States have successfully advocated for shifts in local government policies to move their communities toward enhanced resiliency, with some initiatives using more oppositional tactics than others. At the more amicable and

minimally controversial end of the policy spectrum, a number of initiatives have worked to change policies that limit local food production. For example, four initiatives that responded to the survey – Transition Sarasota (Sarasota, FL), Transition Centre (State College, PA), Transition Mankato (Mankato, MN), and Transition Staunton Augusta (Staunton, VA) – were able to lobby local governments to overturn bans on raising egg-laying hens in their municipalities. Transition Culver City (Culver, CA) is currently working with their local council to rewrite the regulations governing parkways, particularly the space between the curb and the sidewalk. The initiative wants Culver City residents to have the ability to grow edible plants in the parkways, install small structures like free libraries, and make curb cuts to allow for direct infiltration of water into the ground, thus preventing stormwater from running off into the sewer and local water treatment system. Transition Amherst (Amherst, MA) worked with their city council and community groups to acquire a 19-acre parcel of land to be used as an incubator farm for novice, aspiring farmers.

Local energy policy lobbying efforts are also popular with Transition initiatives in the US. In two separate cases, initiatives successfully lobbied their local governing bodies to municipalize their area’s electric utility and place it into public stewardship. Members of Transition Sebastopol (Sebastopol, CA) joined other initiatives in Sonoma County, CA to develop a community choice aggregation scheme in their area.<sup>4</sup> In another case, Sustainable Berea (Berea, KY) successfully petitioned the existing municipally-owned

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<sup>4</sup> A community choice aggregator is a publicly-owned utility that affords communities participating in the system the right to collectively negotiate electricity rates and the percentage of renewable energy in the electricity mix.

utility to install a 246-panel solar array in the town, portions of which were leased to community residents who wished to green their electricity supply. Participants in Transition Town Media are currently collaborating with a regional planning commission to develop a community solar project. The initiative is acting as the project manager, distributing the request for contractor proposals while simultaneously marketing solar energy systems to the community in an effort to increase bulk purchasing power and bring down the up-front capital costs. At the same time, the planning commission is working with the local authorities in Media to reduce soft costs to solar energy installations such as permitting and inspection fees. Woodstock Transition Town (Woodstock, NY) and the Transition Staunton August initiatives are spearheading similar community solar efforts in their cities.

Backyard chickens and community solar projects are policy shifts that individual community members must opt into in order to participate, but some initiatives have engaged in larger policy campaigns that cover all community members. For instance, the Transition Charlottesville-Albemarle initiative (Charlottesville, VA) discovered that their local water board made an administrative decision – without asking for public comment or otherwise informing local residents – to apply chloramine as a secondary disinfectant in the municipal water system. Concerned about the public health and environmental impacts of the chemical additive, the group lobbied vigorously against the water board’s policy change. Finally, after a multi-year campaign, the board abandoned the chloramine policy and switched to a more costly but less risky carbon filtration system. Anti-fracking ordinances are particularly popular causes with many Transition groups. Transition Aromas (Aromas, CA), Kirkland in Transition (Kirkland, NY), Local Future (Grand

Rapids, MI), and Transition San Francisco (San Francisco, CA) have all advocated for fracking bans in their municipalities and regions. Plastic bag bans, local soda taxes, pesticide ordinances, and healthier school lunch options are further examples of local policies changes pushed forward by Transition initiatives. There are also less controversial policy shifts that Transition initiatives are responsible for catalyzing but which apply to the wider community. For instance, Transition Northfield (Northfield, MN) successfully lobbied the city to create and manage a recycling program for the city's downtown and public park areas. Woodstock Transition Town drafted legislation, later approved by the city council, to mandate all local restaurants to collect their organic waste for composting.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The three areas where Transition initiatives have opportunities and are advised to intervene and act – acquiring access to decision-making power, influencing local development plans, and lobbying for policy change – are extremely political enterprises (Stone 2012, Cullingworth and Caves 2014). Indeed, they are *essentially* political. Keeping with the suggestion to avoid overtly political activity such as protests and radical direct action, Transition initiatives are nevertheless employing tactics for effecting community change that are inherently political in their constitution and execution. The examples reported above demonstrate that many Transition initiatives in the United States are willing to practice confrontational politics when necessary and appropriate, all while finding a balance on the movement's political engagement guidelines. This conclusion challenges the understanding of the Transition movement as an apolitical social movement that only practices secessionist politics, and it sparks the need to reexamine political practices on an initiative-by-initiative basis. Armed with this revised view of Transition politics, it is

possible to interpret the rationale for, and consequences of, initiative political engagement in a deeper and more nuanced fashion.

Closer inspection of the case of Transition Charlottesville-Albemarle's (TCA) anti-chloramine campaign reveals relevant insights into the risks and rewards of secessionist and confrontational political engagement strategies. The local water board's administrative decision to add chloramine as a water treatment option initially occurred without public knowledge or input. When TCA eventually learned of the board's decision, they elected to practice confrontational politics, joining forces with the Sierra Club, local media outlets, and local legal counsel. If TCA had decided to practice secessionist politics, essentially remaining agnostic on the chloramine issue, the campaign may have failed to get off the ground, it may have been ineffective, and chloramine would currently be applied as a water treatment alternative. This is entirely hypothetical, of course, but a member of the community who worked on the effort with TCA wrote in an email that, 'Transition's membership and organizing got the word out early on... I'm not sure that our group of citizen activists, if we had been operating independently without Transition, could have been successful.'

By successfully engaging in confrontational politics, TCA's anti-chloramine campaign was able to overcome the two major limitations to the secessionist strategy. First, the policy shift from chloramine to carbon filtration water treatment avoids locking the municipality into a suspected public health and environmental threat. Consequently, this water treatment pathway strengthens the capacity of the community to achieve an advanced state of resiliency and environmental performance. The second major limitation of the secessionist strategy is also avoided, namely the inability to amplify and apply the

impacts to the entire community. By successfully contesting the chloramine proposal, CTA was able to propagate an outcome that, by default, extends to every rate payer under the water board's jurisdiction. Because it is backed by the force and authority of a local administrative institutions, the reach of a formal policy shift such as carbon filtration of a municipal water supply is considerably greater than the scale of transformation generated through secessionist grassroots programs and projects. TCA's confrontational approach resulted in a successful campaign, and it acutely highlights these limitations of the secessionist strategy to the extent that secessionist politics potentially exposes Transition initiatives and communities to regressive outcomes. Engaging in secessionist politics when there is a policy or planning proposal under consideration that would very likely harm the community and the local environment is an extremely risky proposition, and it helps to explain why some initiatives are lobbying their municipal governments to institute fracking bans. This conclusion should not be interpreted to suggest that confrontational politics is or ought to be the primary political engagement strategy for initiatives, as it certainly carries its own risks and limitations. The concerns of initiative sluggishness, co-option, and alienation are not unfounded, and evidence suggests that policy successes reach a point of diminishing returns after a certain level of intersection between movements and the political process (Böhm 2015). However, the conclusion does suggest that depending on situational context, Transition initiatives that elect to practice confrontational politics with local institutional governance structures could more rapidly and comprehensively advance community resiliency, economic localization, and low-carbon development. Consistent with the movement's emphasis on place-based innovation, a confrontational political engagement strategy will likely be determined on an initiative-by-initiative basis.



Looking forward, confrontational politics could become normalized practice for many initiatives as there are a variety of local policy and planning changes that can ease a community's transition to a more resilient and localized future (Calfee and Weissman 2012). On the Transition US survey, respondents were asked if there are local laws that impacted their initiative's ability to develop and implement programs, projects, or activities. A common response was bans on backyard hens and beekeeping, but respondents also mentioned various zoning and building code issues such as prohibitions or burdensome limitations against co-housing spaces, Tiny Houses, greywater systems, rainwater harvesting systems, greenhouses, and composting toilets. In addition, several respondents, whose initiatives wished to inform the wider community about the value and quality of locally grown food, wrote that their municipalities required several rounds of paperwork and high insurance and permitting fees to serve local food at public events. Initiatives can ignore and transgress these regulations, but that would involve practicing a form of protest politics and would push against the boundary of the movement's political engagement guidelines. Alternatively, initiatives can advance sustainable and resilient livelihoods in their communities by engaging in confrontational politics and transforming policy and planning through institutionalized governance structures. When initiatives become more active and engaged with local government decision-making, their vision of and development strategy for the community will be challenged to coalesce into a more coherent, consistent, and publicly acceptable political orientation. Possessing and portraying a more moderate identity, and expressing that identity through institutionalized governance structures, will partially reshape initiatives' fluid organizational characteristics as well as public perceptions of niche behaviors that undermine outreach, recruitment,

diffusion, and scaling (Seyfang and Smith 2007, Staggenborg and Ogrodnik 2015). The end result is that initiatives that practice confrontational politics will likely experience a Janus-faced effect, since engagement with local governments will alienate some community members as it attracts others.

Scholars of Transition commonly analyze and characterize the movement's politics as a uniform subject of inquiry, and they draw reasonable and credible conclusions. Yet these analyses obscure the place-based grassroots innovations that are the hallmark of the movement's initiatives. By refocusing the analytic lens on the local community scale, and by probing the opportunities and strategies for initiatives to spur policy change, subtleties begin to emerge. The extent of political action and the politics of the wider movement are afforded a deeper and more nuanced appreciation. While this inquiry revealed opportunities and highlighted practices of US Transition initiatives engaging in confrontational politics, much more research at the local scale is needed to comprehensively articulate the scope of initiatives' political practice. Future scholarship can elucidate further opportunities where initiatives could engage in confrontational politics, and case studies can expand upon the strengths and weaknesses of a confrontational strategy. Additional research is also needed to investigate actual impacts to the community when Transition initiatives' confrontational political approach results in a policy and planning victory, with a particular focus on dimensions of equity and the redistribution of costs and benefits that invariably transpire whenever change occurs.

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