

Technical Issues vs. Values Based Issues

In planning and in decision making, there are basically two types of issues.

Technical Issues are issues of feasibility. If you give the same information to a number of trained professionals and ask the same question, you will likely get very similar answers. You want someone with some training to deal with technical issues, so you usually hire expertise to provide answers to technical issues.

Values Based Issues are issues of desirability. They usually involve tradeoffs in public goods. There is no one right answer to values based issues, simply the values of a community at a particular point in time. You don't want your technical staff or consultants to deal with these issues. You want the general public to tell you what their values are, and failing that, you get them from their elected representatives who are in place to make the difficult tradeoffs between public goods.

Example

If we have a polluted river, you hire technical experts to tell you how much pollution there is and what kind it is. You also hire technical experts to tell you what options are available for cleaning up the pollution and how much pollution can be cleaned up using each strategy. They will also tell you what each strategy costs. Assume that option A cleans up 10% of the pollution and costs \$1million, that option B cleans up 40% of the pollution and costs \$2million and that option C cleans up 70% of the pollution and costs \$20 million. All these are technical issues. Choosing which option to pursue is a values based issue. Only the values of a community will determine whether it is "worth" spending ten times as much to clean up an additional 30% of the pollution. The experts can't make that determination.

In recreation we make difficult values based tradeoffs all the time. Examples include whether to provide more service to those already participating or to use the resources instead to provide some service to those that aren't currently getting any. Or, to use limited available resources to raise the quality of existing services or invest instead in additional service at the same quality.

In PERC's proposal, we would prefer to focus all input from the general public and council on values based issues, and to use consultant expertise supported by staff expertise, on the technical issues in the Needs Assessment/Facilities Plan.

Demand vs. Need

Demand is defined as the amount of a good or service that is consumed at a particular price. Demand is always a function of price. However, in recreation we sometimes ignore the price side of the definition and simply ask people what they want in order to provide what they say they want. PERC believes this is not an appropriate basis for making decisions about public leisure services. Demand essentially focuses on direct benefits to users of a service and the value they place on those benefits.

Need is always a subset of demand. In order for there to be a need, there must first be some demand for a service. But in order for that service to also be a need, there must be some form of indirect benefit to all citizens, from which they cannot escape.

The private sector is always demand driven. If there is enough demand for something, and it is legal, the private sector will respond. The public sector is always needs driven. In order for it to become involved, the service must also have some benefit to the entire community.

In the Needs Assessment and Facility Plan, PERC would measure some demand but would quickly focus on the portion of demand which is a true need.

Example:

Assume there are two possible uses for a multipurpose space in a recreation centre. One is a group of fifty adult females who want a fitness class. The other is a group of ten teens at risk that are interested in a class on making digital films of skateboarding. The decision on which one gets the room is less about demand (which would clearly indicate the adult female fitness class) and more about what would generate the greatest good to the entire community (which might easily be motivating the youth at risk into less antisocial behaviour).

Another example would relate to choosing the goods to sell at a public concession. Does the public sector decision maker choose the goods with the highest margin (e.g. coke and candy floss) or does she choose the goods which are consistent with the healthy living mandate of the Commission (which might be fruit or juice).